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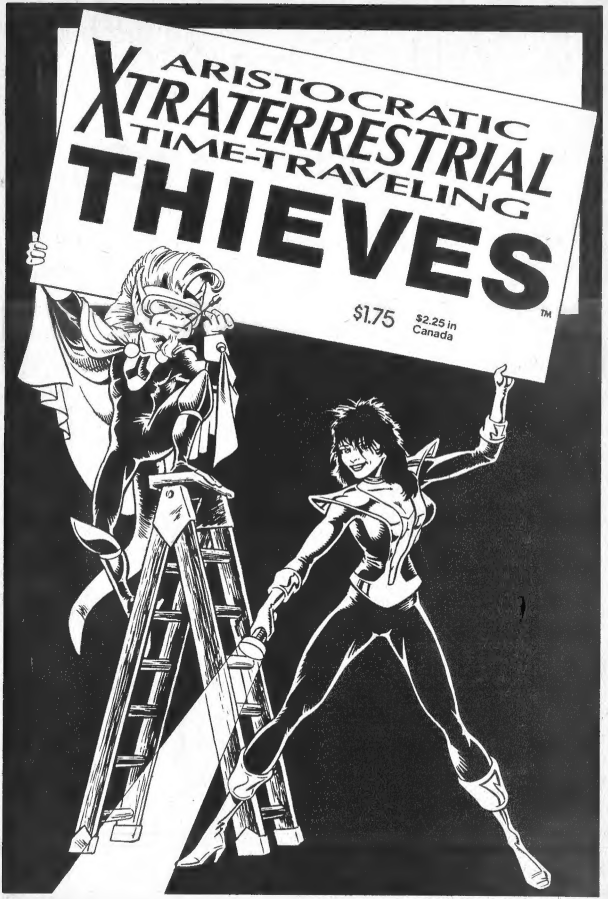
SOUTHERN KNIGHTS #15. **The Goddess Morrigan walks the earth once more and—aided by a reincarnated Druid—thirsts for Dragon's blood! (First of two parts.)** *Story: HENRY VOGEL. Art: MARK PROPST.*



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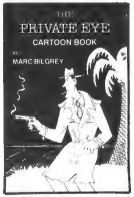

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David Anthony Kraft's COMICS INTERVIEW *#36* 1986. Published monthly by Fictioneer Books Ltd., Suite 301, 234 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10001. Copyright© 1986 Fictioneer Books Ltd. *All rights reserved.* SUBSCRIPTIONS: $24 for twelve issues. CANADA, MEXICO & FOREIGN (U.S. funds only): $30 for twelve. Any statements made in this magazine, express or implied, are solely those of the individuals being interviewed and do *not* represent the editorial position of the publisher, who accepts no responsibility for such statements.

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UP FRONT

Last issue, I ripped aside the veil of secrecy surrounding publishing and revealed to all the world the way a publisher obtains his projects. So, now that the project is "in house" (a technical term which, translated for the layman, means the artist is still working on it and won't answer the publisher's frantic phone calls), the next decision to be made is what format it will be published in.

Pulp paper? Magazine? Book? Black and white or color? You get the idea. Of course, this will be dictated somewhat by content — where will those readers you're trying to reach be looking for the type of project you're publishing? A comic book carefully packaged to resemble a Penguin Classic would probably not stand much of a chance, since those looking for comics are not likely to be found perusing the classics section.

Cost effectiveness must also be considered. Even if a magazine in the shape of a double helix would suit the subject matter, no printer is geared to produce it — and few readers would be willing to pay the $129.95 cover price.

(Stan Lee once told me of a conference in which Jack Kirby suggested a round magazine — but as Stan said, while such a shape would undoubtedly attract attention, it would also roll off the newsstands.)

There is one final, important consideration in deciding upon a format. The distribution outlets available to the publisher will often be the final deciding factor. And that, of course, brings us to distributors...a topic for another day!

-Dave

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CENSORED

"I started pencilling KNIGHTS #12 and 13."

ARISTOCRATIC XTRATERRESTRIAL TIME-TRAVELING THIEVES™

Artist Mark Propst, with X-Thieves Fred & Bianca, keeping a diligent eye on his work.

One of the fringe benefits of working for COMICS INTERVIEW is getting to meet the interesting people that come to David Kraft's mountain home in north Georgia. Though Henry Vogel and Mark Propst are the creative team on our sister publication, THE SOUTHERN KNIGHTS, Henry lives across the line in South Carolina and Mark lives way down in Florida, so the first chance I had to meet these wild and crazy guys was during the recent annual SOUTHERN KNIGHTS weekend powwow. Just before their long ride home I managed to corral them for this joint interview, which ended up confirming certain of my suspicions about the dubious nature of the creative forces at work here. See if you don't agree!

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Mark Propst

Born: Somewhere in Illinois, 1964

Residence: Pensacola, Florida

Occupation: Artist

Training: Civics Class — I didn't pay attention so I sat there and drew

Favorite Artist: Perez, of course

Favorite Color: Real nice dark shiny red

MARK BORAX: *How long ago did you come up with the idea for SOUTHERN KNIGHTS, Henry?*

HENRY VOGEL: Oh, the whole thing pretty much existed by late 1981. Bits and pieces sort of came together over the course of a year. Electrode is the first character we came up with, and the other three just showed up all of a sudden, over three months. We went into production in '82.

MARK: *What issue are you up to?*

HENRY: The most recent issue out on the stands is #14, but we're working on various stages of the next five or six issues, up through #20.

MARK: *Since you're now under the prestigious COMICS INTERVIEW imprint, many fans may not know that you started out self-publishing, right?*

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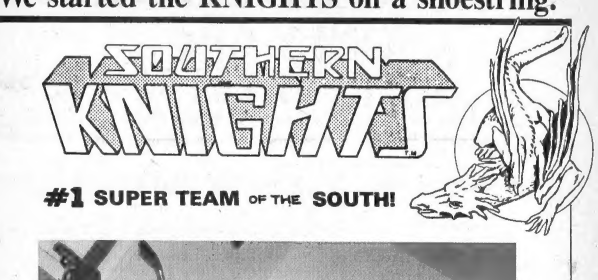
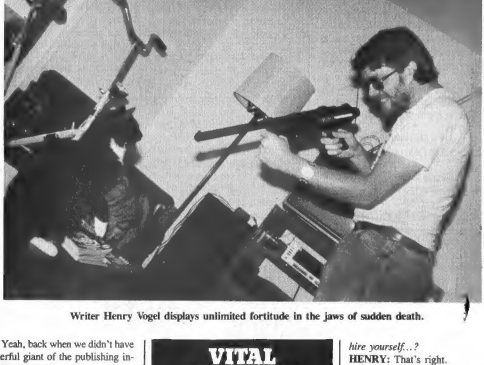
"We started the KNIGHTS on a shoestring."





Writer Henry Vogel displays unlimited fortitude in the jaws of sudden death.

HENRY: Yeah, back when we didn't have that wonderful giant of the publishing industry — **David Anthony Kraft** — running things. It was just **David Willis**— a friend of mine from college — and myself.
MARK: *What gave you the impetus to come up with your own superhero team and self-publish? Were you disgusted with the existing market? Trying to make money?*
HENRY: I wasn't so much disgusted with the market, and I really would've been surprised if we'd made money. Just had come up with the idea and wanted to write comic books, and quite frankly, figured that the easiest way to break in was with a company that you owned so that you could say "I think we'll hire that guy — he's real good!"
MARK: *So you incorporated in order to hire yourself...?*
HENRY: That's right.
MARK: *As long as you don't fire yourself, you'll be okay.*
MARK PROPST: *(Laughter.)*
HENRY: But we sold ourselves out from under us, though — it was a crushing blow.
MARK: *How many issues did The Guild produce before Dave Kraft took over?*
HENRY: Seven. DAK actually took over when #8 was in the creative process. The pencils and most of the scripting had been done, and he came in and did some editing work and actually published that issue.
MARK: *Besides Henry Vogel, we also have with us Mark Propst — is that how you pronounce it — with a long "o"?*
MARK PROPST: That's it.
MARK: *You're now doing both pencils*

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Henry Vogel
Born: 16 May 1957 — Chapel Hill, NC
Residence: Greenville, SC
Occupation: Bum
Training: Reading thousands of comics
Favorite Comics Writers: Mike Baron, Dave Sim, Matt Wagner
Least Favorite Villain: That skateboard guy — what's his name? Rocket Racer! Just ahead of Hammerhead!

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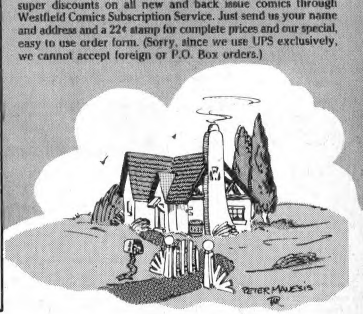

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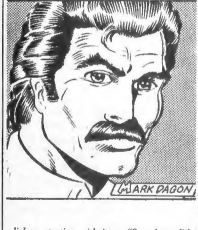
"The KNIGHTS went into production in '82."

and inks on the KNIGHTS — how'd you get involved with Henry, here?
MARK PROPST: I got my start on the book pencilling issues #12 and #13, and I'm not quite sure what exactly happened, but they ended up needing someone full-time from then on. And — they had me!

MARK: *How does one get a plum assignment like SOUTHERN KNIGHTS — how did Henry or David get ahold of you?*

MARK PROPST: Actually, I contacted Henry, 'cause I'd just done some work for Americomics, and the jobs were few and far between, so I sent off little resumes with batches of art and xeroxes. And when they saw 'em, they said "Send more!" so I did.
MARK: *And now you're chained to your drawing board, I see.*
MARK PROPST: Oh yeah!
MARK: *So David Kraft took over as pub-*



lisher, starting with issue #8 — how did that come about?
HENRY: One of those coincidences that seem like destiny. We didn't know he was down south in Clayton, Georgia, only an hour's drive away from us in Clemson, South Carolina, until he got in touch. We just thought "COMICS INTERVIEW — New York — that's where everything is!" And we got a letter from him chastising us for not being in contact, since we were so close.

We thought "Gee — he's the only comics professional anywhere near us." We got in relatively regular contact and we were doing some advertising with COMICS INTERVIEW. I just happened to mention that we'd gotten this really nice rejection letter from First Comics to explain why they couldn't do the SOUTHERN KNIGHTS. We'd been pursuing other pub-

lishers at the time, and I could hear DAK's ears just sort of perking up — "Ah, you're looking for another publisher," and he said "I've been thinking about publishing comics!" And he could probably hear me standing up straighter and going "Ah, he's looking to publish comics!" And a whole lot of water under the bridge and here we are!
MARK: *So what made you — (Telephone rings.)*
MARK PROPST: — answer the phone?

MARK: *(Laughter. Turns machine off.)*

HENRY: Is this going to be in the interview?
MARK: *Don't worry — we'll excise anything important.*

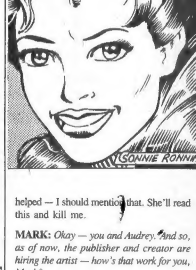
HENRY: And just leave the other stuff — okay. *(Laughter.)*
MARK: *What prompted you to decide to stop self-publishing?*

HENRY: The simple fact that other companies had much better resources. We started on a real shoestring budget. In fact, I

don't even think it deserves to be called a shoestring budget. We started with $2,000. and we made some early mistakes that you're bound to make before you learn the ropes —
MARK: *So that you can make the later mistakes.*

HENRY: — and they cost you money. So we'd reached the point where it was hand-to-mouth and getting worse all the time. We were running out of money, then DAK said he was interested, and I certainly didn't want to stop writing the book.

MARK: *Something possessed David Kraft.*
HENRY: Don't ask me what.
MARK: *And you arrived at what sounds like a satisfying publishing arrangement. Henry — you're the sole creator of SOUTHERN KNIGHTS?*
HENRY: Um-hum. My wife,. Audrey,



helped — I should mention that. She'll read this and kill me.

MARK: *Okay — you and Audrey. And so, as of now, the publisher and creator are hiring the artist — how's that work for you, Mark?*
MARK PROPST: Uh — it's great. I get paid, anyway.
MARK: *So the artist gets paid, the letterer gets paid — what about you and David?*
HENRY: *(Hysterical laughter.)* I keep thinking — "Someday . . ." We're sure it's just over the hill.
MARK: *I understand you're also moving onto an unofficial monthly schedule?*
HENRY: That's true. WE'RE TAKING A CRACK AT MONTHLY!
MARK: *How do you work with the artist, Henry?*
HENRY: Whip in one hand and . . . basically, I write a plot, going into as much

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"They manage to survive — in a mansion."

detail as I feel I need to, but I try to leave as much structure as possible up to the artist, so they can have more creative input to the book. They're supposed to be visually oriented, and I'm just the writer, you see. I put out a prose plot, from as short as two or three pages, up to as long as fifteen single-spaced typewritten pages.

MARK: *So you work so-called "Marvel-style"?*

HENRY: Yeah, Marvel-style.
MARK: *How did you come up with the concept of each of the Southern Knights?*

HENRY: Electrode was the first. I'm not even sure where all of the ideas came from. I'd just been trying to think of a comic-book hero, and opened the idea up to a few friends: "If you happen to think of anything, let me know, I may use it." And a friend mentioned something about an electrically-based hero. We had a lot of fun playing with that, 'cause we were originally gonna have Electrode needing to recharge periodically, which we dropped. We had this great character all worked up to go with him — Battery Lad!

MARK: *Has a ring to it.*
HENRY: Battery Lad's entire function was to run around scuffing his feet on carpets and then touch Electrode and give off static electricity. Unfortunately, Battery Lad went the way of many other great ideas in comics —

MARK: *Into the Marvel-Bullpen?*

MARK PROPST: *(Laughter.)*
MARK: *I can see it now — Mr. Voltage Regulator . . .so, Electrode was the first?*
HENRY: Yeah. He has pretty well-defined, sort of typical comic-book powers.

MARK PROPST: And he knows it.

HENRY: Huh? Yeah — he knows it, too. The thing that I tried to make different about him is his personality. Dragon and Connie sort of came together at the same time.

MARK: *Wait a minute — let's back up a second. You wanted to make Electrode different from typical comics heroes — explain.*

HENRY: Okay. He's doing it for fun. What he is, is a comic-book *fan* who has had the opportunity to become a comic-book-type superhero. He bases his entire behavior pattern, even though he knows it's corny, on comic book *cliches* and things like that. The first thing he says is "THIS SOUNDS LIKE A JOB FOR ELECTRODE!" And he dashes off to the rescue.

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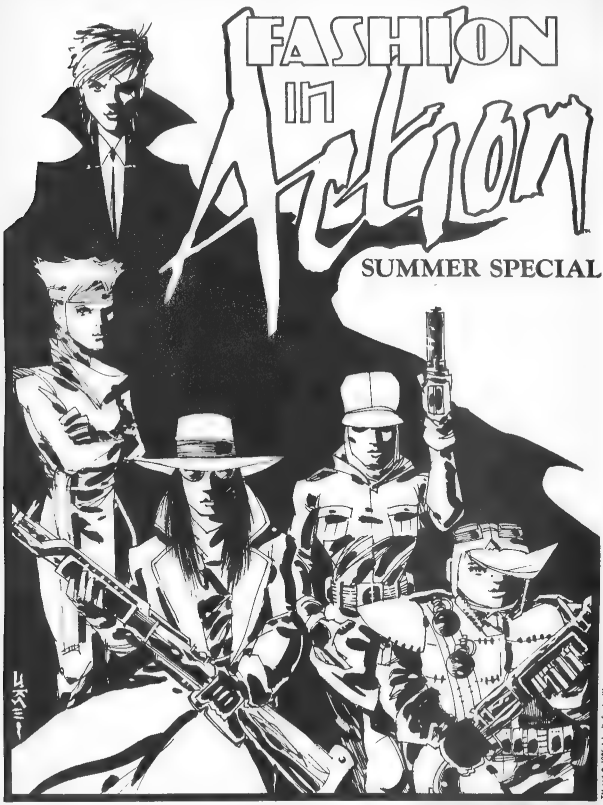

COMING THIS AUGUST FROM ECLIPSE COMICS

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"We'll use 'em, but who the hell are they?"

MARK: *Like Woody Allen waiting for a chance to say the closing lines from CASABLANCA?*

HENRY: Yeah.

MARK: *How did he get his powers?*

HENRY: Oh, he's a genius who created this wonderful process which turned him into Electrode. And Dragon and Connie sort of came together next. Not that I said, "Hey — Dragon and Connie — what a great idea!" But they sort of developed around the same time Connie Ronnin's origins are real easy to trace, 'cause I know what first kicked her off. It was the "Tarna the Terrakian" section of the HEAVY METAL MOVIE. I really enjoyed it, and was thinking "A woman with a sword, and — she used the sword!" All these people wandering around with swords never use them. Valkyrie has never sliced anybody in her life — I don't know what she used the sword for even. So the idea, at first, was for Connie to have a sword, which she would really use to cut people into little bitty pieces. But we thought that might be a little messy and it would be hard to convince, say, the police force of a given city that she deserved their respect and support. So we took it from there to where her powers are now — which is, she hits them with the sword and they *think* they're hurt, but they really aren't.

MARK: *A psychological sword.*

HENRY: Right — it's all mental. She hits somebody and her sword and her mind combine to make your mind think you've just been cut in half.

MARK: *Does the sword actually exist? Does her mind make it manifest, or not?*

HENRY: It exists — sort of. There *is* something there. We call it semi-physical, okay? She's gotta have something to hold onto with her hands.

MARK: *I could think of a few things...*

HENRY: It's not really solid like an actual sword.

MARK: *So if somebody didn't believe they were being hit by her, they might not feel it?*

HENRY: They'd have to really be powerfully able to disbelieve that. The actual explanation of Connie's powers is that she has just about the entire run of mental powers that you see in comic books — telepathy, telekinesis, things like that — and when she's hitting you with the sword she's making your mind react as if you'd been cut. So you don't even have to know she's hit you. She can hit someone from behind, and that'll get 'em.

MARK: *So unless we run into Captain Disbeliever, we'll continue to see her sword working.*

MARK PROPST: *(Laughter.)*

HENRY: We're interested in what might happen if she ran up against another telepath who had better control of her powers. Because Connie's powers only work through the sword — she doesn't even know that she has telepathic power.

MARK: *Will she ever find out?*

HENRY: I don't know — who knows?

MARK: *Mark, how do you find the task of drawing a sword that's not-a-sword?*

MARK PROPST: That's easy, Henry can just write — what's the term?

HENRY: "She draws a semi-physical manifestation of a psychic —

MARK PROPST: — phenomenon —

HENRY: — from within her soul!"

MARK: *So, as an artist, you treat it as if it were a real sword?*

MARK PROPST: I don't draw the exact outside edges, or I don't draw half of it, leaving the other half in shine. It looks like a sword almost on fire.

MARK: *And Dragon came along about the same time as Connie?*

HENRY: He was sort of an offshoot of some character role-playing games. YES, WE PLAYED THE GAMES! God, I'm ashamed to admit it. I READ COMICS, TOO!! Anyway, we roled up some random characters and came up with one person who could turn into some animal form. And I was getting tired of leopards and things like that, and thought wouldn't it be nice if he turned into a griffin. Something from fantasy. I thought that'd be an interesting kind of comic-book hero, but there's a griffin out there already. What really got me is — I liked dragons a lot. I've always liked dragons. They get horrible press. They're really nice guys. So I just took the idea of a person who could turn into a mythical beast, and reversed it into a mythical beast who could turn into a person. It worked well, too — I'm real proud of that.

MARK: *Yeah, Dragon seems to be the fan favorite.*

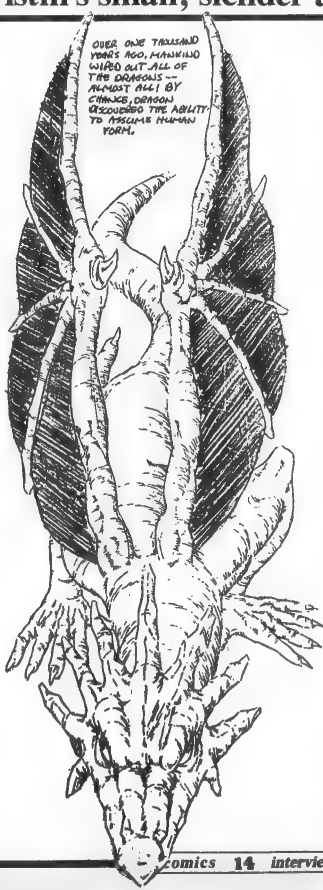
MARK PROPST: And he's fun to draw!

MARK: *How is it, trying to squeeze him in?*

MARK PROPST: Like drawing the Baxter Building in every panel! *(Laughter.)*

MARK: *It's funny that you mention the Baxter Building, because Dragon reminds me of Dragon Man — the Mad Thinker's huge android monster, or the Puppet*

"Kristin's small, slender and attractive,


OVER ONE THOUSAND YEARS AGO, HAWKWIND WARD HIT ALL OF THE DRAGONS -- ALMOST ALL BY CHANCE, DRAGONS DISCOVERED THE ABILITY TO ASSUME HUMAN FORM.

Master's, or somebody from the FF. Big, dumb, sympathetic-lackey type.

HENRY: I didn't read that.

MARK PROPST: Actually, he looked like the Hulk with a big dragon head, or a kind of turtle head.

MARK: *Who else is in SOUTHERN KNIGHTS besides Electrode, Dragon, and Connie?*

HENRY: Kristin, who's definitely the last person we came up with. And the easiest, too. We had the first three, and I felt that three was not a good number for a group — we needed a fourth person. I'd just come up with Connie and Dragon and I thought that they were relatively original handlings of some superhero concepts, so I wanted to come up with somebody else original. I thought, "Well, we're gonna need somebody who, in a tight place, can be strong. Dragon's real strong, but only as a dragon. He's no different than you or me when he's a person."

Once again, we didn't want to go with a lot of the typical things. The really strong people in comics are usually the biggest member of the group, or they're wearing some hulking armor or something. The smaller or more slender characters usually have some quick-associated powers, but they're generally not able to grab a dragon by the tail and flip it out into the street. That's why we made Kristin small, slender and attractive

MARK: *Is she stronger than Dragon?*

HENRY: Yes.

MARK: *How'd she get to be so strong — Wonder Bread?*

HENRY: I hate to use the word, but she's a — *mutant*

MARK PROPST: She was bitten by a radioactive mutant — **EVERYONE:** *(Laughter.)*

MARK: *She was born strong?*

HENRY: Her strength developed as she grew.

MARK: *So she was born with the seeds for being strong.*

HENRY: And as she grew older her strength developed much faster than a normal child's, of course.

MARK: *Has she reached her maturity of strength yet?*

HENRY: Pretty much.

MARK: *How old are the characters?*

HENRY: Well, Dragon's about 3,000 years old, the rest of them are all-in their twenties. David — Electrode — is about 25 or 26. By the time this interview comes out, Connie's 25th birthday will have just passed. Kristin is closing in on 23.

MARK: *How did you come up with the subtitle, "The #1 Super Team of the South"?*

but she can flip Dragon on his tail!"

HENRY: DAK came up with that. We knew it right from the start. We knew we were the *only* superhero team set in the South. Are we still the only super-team set in the South?

MARK PROPST: It depends on when you started, compared to **Bill Black.**

HENRY: When did he start?

MARK PROPST: Lord knows. I know we beat FEMFORCE.

HENRY: I'm pretty sure we were first. We came out in '82. we didn't want to set our stories in New York — another *cliche.* I've never been to New York — how am I gonna write a story about a city I've never been to? Atlanta was real close, it was a nice large city, and worked naturally.

MARK: *Are the sales higher in the South?*

HENRY: I really have no idea. We sell to all the major direct comics distributors, and where they ship to, I don't know.

MARK: *A lot of people are going to be finding out about the SOUTHERN KNIGHTS for the first time through this interview.*

HENRY: I hope so!

MARK: *Since they're not heroes for hire, how do the Southern Knights support themselves?*

HENRY: Right off the bat in #1, we had the Knights save this wealthy socialite in Atlanta — rescue him from kidnappers. At the end of the issue, he does this kind of number, like Jay Grant from the Legionnaires: "I'm gonna support these people — they'll be *my* superheroes in Atlanta" — you know, a *cliche* thing to do. In the second issue, we turned the whole thing around, because all he was really interested in was "I'm the only person around here who has his very own superhero team." He wanted to show them off at a garden party, he was only interested in using them as a social coup. That all backfired when he deliberately didn't tell them about a crime in progress. His story and the origin of the group are collected in the SOUTHERN KNIGHTS GRAPHIC NOVEL.

MARK: *And we don't see him anymore?*

HENRY: He comes back now and then. They move into his neighborhood — The Hampton House, where they all stay, in Atlanta. He's all set to make a good impression on whoever moved in, until he finds out it's the Southern Knights — "OH, NO — NOT THEM!"

At the start of the third issue, they're sitting around trying to figure out what they're going to do for money now that this guy is gone. Mark, or Dragon, suggests "I thunk we oughtta all get jobs!" Kristin suddenly looks and says, "Wait a minute —

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MICRA

MIND CONTROLLED REMOTE AUTOMATON

"The cop is a RAMBO type — big, massive."

before we get that desperate — let's go talk to daddy!'' She comes from a very wealthy family in Florida. They fly down and find out that superhero teams are tax deductible, so daddy helps set them up in the Hampton House. But he's still not pouring loads into them — they finance themselves, too.

MARK PROPST: They manage to survive . . .in a mansion.

HENRY: Yeah. *(Laughter.)* They have various incomes. David has some patents that he's still collecting money on, and Connie works as a fencing instructor for the Atlanta Fencing Society. Mark is an author. Kristin uses her allowance as her contribution.

MARK: *Okay, Henry, how is it different working for David Kraft as opposed to yourself as publisher?*

HENRY: Well, there are a couple of different ways of looking at it. All the work of doing the publishing — calling the distributors, checking up on late payments, soliciting, promotion — all those headaches I don't have to worry about anymore — they're all DAK's now! But there's no less amount of work to do, actually. We're trying to move up production so I have to spend more time writing. I almost feel a bit more pressure, because when it was The Guild, if the book went under — all right, we'd lose money, but it was *our* money. Now if something happens, it's **Dave Kraft's** money that's at risk — which is sort of a relief to me.

MARK: *But not to David, I'm sure. (Laughter.)*

HENRY: It puts more pressure to make sure the book's good, it continues selling, it comes out on time. I have to work just as hard to make sure the book improves in quality. Dave's really helped a lot with that, 'cause he's editing the book now, and he's made a living writing comics, for Marvel and DC, which is more than I can say for myself, so he points out things that need improving, and I think I've improved quite a bit from working with him.

MARK: *What about Audrey's contribution to the SOUTHERN KNIGHTS?*

HENRY: She helped create the group. When I was trying to come up with the fourth member, and I wanted her to be real *original*, I'm pretty sure some of the changes in Kristin — making her a smaller person, things like that — were Audrey's ideas. We both sort of scripted the first three or four issues, but I had more time because I was going to school, and Audrey was working a full-time job. She'd come home and be tired, and I was doing more and more of the scripting in the afternoons, so she just sort of fell out of it.

The SOUTHERN KNIGHTS "undercover" cover for upcoming issue #20.

"David Kraft's money is at risk now, not

MARK: *Did Audrey come in as a comics reader, a writer, or just an interested partner?*

HENRY: She came in as a comics reader. She'd picked up comics from me. She's probably read some of the back-issue purchases we've made from people's collections more than I have.

MARK: *Is she still an active contributor to your creative process?*

HENRY: She's pretty much on the sidelines. I pass ideas by her a lot, to get her opinions, because she still has a good feel for the characters. But she doesn't do too much on the scripting end now. If I'm particularly stuck about what they should say at a certain point, she might pass on some ideas.

MARK: *Do you admit to the local folks in South Carolina what you do for a living?*

HENRY: I don't go out of my way to bring it up. I'm not a horrendously modest person or anything —

MARK PROPST: *(Laughter.)*

HENRY: — but it's not something that I try desperately to bring up. However, every time it does come up there's a surprising amount of "Oh, really — I've never met anybody who writes comic books!"

MARK: *Do they come up and touch you?*

HENRY: Yes. I bring them issues and, for what it's worth, they seem to actually enjoy them. Partially, I'm sure, just because they know the person who's creating them. Too, they may be lying — but I can usually tell if somebody's lying. It sorta shows me that plenty of people would probably enjoy comics.

MARK: *What's your opinion on the state of mainstream comics?*

HENRY: I wonder, with a lot of comics, that some of these superheroes haven't killed themselves yet, because it's always one disaster after another. They're scrabbling desperately to get a few breaths of air before drowning for another fifteen issues. There doesn't seem to be many out there having *fun*.

MARK PROPST: I'm having fun!

MARK: *So SOUTHERN KNIGHTS is a fun sort of book produced by a bunch of fun guys?*

HENRY: That's right!

MARK PROPST: Golly.

(David Kraft enters.)

MARK: *Here comes Mr. Publisher, in sunglasses and sneakers. Maybe now we can discuss the latest COMICS INTERVIEW publication concept you guys came up with this weekend?*

HENRY & MARK PROPST: ARISTOCRATIC XTRA-TERRESTRIAL TIME-TRAVELLING THIEVES!!

MARK: *(Laughter.)*

SO, WHAT'RE WE SUPPOSED TO STEAL FROM THIS EARTH PLACE, FRED?
BOMB ART... THE GUY THAT INVITED US CALLED IT EARTH'S GREATEST TREASURE.
LOOK, FRED-- IT'S JANET!
300,000 KM/SECOND IT'S NOT JUST A GOOD IDEA THE LAW!
COME ON-- STOP AND PICK ME UP!
AREN'T YOU GOING TO STOP FOR HIM?
NAH-- WE'RE NOT GOING ANYWHERE NEAR BATELGUISE.
AW-- THAT'S THE FIRST SECOND SHE'S IGNORED ME!
ROAD MAY HAVE BEEN DESIGNED BY THE EARTH'S SPEED LIMIT!
BING! BING! BING!
HOT KABOOM!!-- JUST WHAT'S NEEDED TO JUMP UP THE DAY-- A SPEEDER! NOW THE RED SHIFT IS USUALLY 88-0-0-0 WORTHY!
RED-S TO BASE-- I'M IN PURSUIT OF A SPEEDER!
WE LOSE'S HIM!!
WHAT-- I CAN'T BELIEVE IT!
DO YOU KNOW WHAT THIS ONE SAYS MY ACTION FIG WORTH, WHEN YOU'VE GOT THE DOUBT FIGHTS?
THAT'S WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU'RE OUT OF THE STORY-- ONE GOES BACK AND GETS A COP, OR THREE! HOW SOMETHING REALLY RARE LIKE EARLY SOUTHERN
I'LL LOSE HIM, THOUGH! THIS CAR'S ROUND TO BE MORE MANEUVERABLE THAN HIS LITTLE CYCLE.
HEY-- YOU'RE REALLY PUTTING THE OL' FREEWHEEL THROUGH THE PACES!
BIANCA-- IF I'VE TOLD YOU ONCE, I'VE TOLD YOU A THOUSAND TIMES--
DON'T CALL IT THE FREEWHEEL!
ACTUALLY, YOU'VE ONLY TOLD ME EIGHT HUNDRED AND TWELVE TIMES.
GIVE UP-- WE'VE GOT A COP ON OUR TAIL!

Above and overleaf: A sneak preview of the pencils of hot new X-THIEVES one-shot by Henry and Mark.

MARK PROPST: Which is a book that I feel I'm gonna have a lot of input on. When I came to SOUTHERN KNIGHTS they were already created. I get to change them into my style, but it's still basically Henry's creation. Now, we've got this comic book which probably will take place in the "Southern Knights Universe." It'll be a one-shot, but we may go on with them.

HENRY: When sales skyrocket and the first printing jumps to 80 or 90 bucks, we may condescend to bring out a second issue.

MARK: *Besides all the other 50 million three-adjectives-and-a-noun titles, where did you get the inspiration for the book?*

HENRY: One of Mark's drawings kicked it off.

MARK PROPST: It was done two years ago. I remember showing it at conventions along with my other stuff because I thought it was different — showed originality and stuff. But nothing came of it—

DAVID ANTHONY KRAFT: *Until yesterday.*

MARK: *So from a drawing, basically of a New Wave-looking woman kneeling with this weird little alien —*

HENRY: Yeah. I was just looking through a bunch of stuff Mark had that was just lay-

© 1988 Vopat, Propst & Kraft

our money — which is sort of a relief!"

© 1986 Vogel, Propst & Kraft

DO YOU WANT TO GET OUT AND WALK?
THIS IS THE POLICE!
PULL OVER!
PULL OVER, SHMENDRICK!
PULL OVER?
WHERE?
IT IS A KIND OF STUMP THING TO SAY-- BUT YOU CAN'T EXPECT MUCH FROM A COP WHO BROADCASTS A SIREN OVER THE RADIO!
ALL RIGHT, DUSTY-- WHERE'S THE SUPERMOM? NOW, STEP OUT OF YOUR CAR, PLEASE
STEP OUT OF THE--! LOOK, MACGUNN-- FOR--BRAINS--
FRED, HIS SUGGESTION MAY NOT BE SMART, BUT MAYBE THE SPACE WOULD BE MORE UNDERSTANDING...
...IF WE DIDN'T HAVE A CAR!
HEH, HEH! GOOD JOKE!
FRED PAUSES THOUGHTFULLY FOR A MOMENT, THEN HIS FINGERS DANCE ACROSS ROWS OF BUTTONS, WITH A SLIGHTLY MANIACAL CHORTLE, AND A CONSPIRATORIAL GIGGLE FROM BIANCA, HE PRESSES THE FINAL BUTTON!
IN AN EERIE, HAUNTING-NESS BILLINGS...
THE FREDMOBILE BEGINS TO CHANGE!
THE CAPE! SMALL FLAPS UNFOLD!
...AND CAMBLO ARMS--AND ARMS--AND IMPOSSIBLY, AGAIN!
THE CHASSIS TELESCOPES, EXPANDS, AND TELESCOPES SOME MORE!
STRANGE, LETHAL-LOOKING PROTRUSIONS APPEAR ALL OVER THE CAR'S SURFACE!
...AND SUDDENLY...

ing there. The little guy looked so neat that I felt he had to have something to do. My first thought was, "Wouldn't it be neat if we could put them into the SOUTHERN, KNIGHTS?" Fine. If we're gonna put them in — who the hell are they? They looked to me like thieves — high class thieves. Art thieves. I was talking about how they could break into the Louvre and steal the "Mona Lisa," and the Southern Knights could come after them, trying to put some background into them, and DAK comes along and says, "Why put 'em in with the SOUTHERN KNIGHTS? Sounds great by themselves — let's make a book!"

MARK: *So why did you come up with the four-name title?*

HENRY: Because we looked at the back of MARVEL AGE, which had an ad for this thing about the elephants — three adjectives and then pachyderms or whatever —

DAK: *You guys were groaning about that.*

MARK PROPST: Yeah.

HENRY: So I said, "Well, if they're gonna have their own book, it's gotta have a title like, um, ARISTOCRATIC EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL MARSUPIAL. —

MARK: *Wasn't it "ADULT"?*

HENRY: That's right! No. . .no, it was "OLD AGE!" OLD-AGE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL MARSUPIAL THIEVES, but I thought better of it, 'cause the little guy looks sort of like an aristocratic kangaroo, so that's where it came from.

MARK PROPST: That, and having a title that starts with an "A" will put us high up on the list.

HENRY: That's right — right up in the "A" section where the retailers won't get tired of the list yet when they're placing orders with the distributors. And Dave came up with the time-travelling part, so they could go back and commit all the great unsolved robberies on earth.

MARK: *You mean "Who took my sketch pad in fourth grade?"*

HENRY: You got it! So from there we built up that these guys are obtainers of whatever you want. They work out of the whole Galaxy getting anything people want from anywhen — for a price. The little alien's name is Fred. Actually, it's Pan-safredicopacog, but Bianca — the girl — just calls him Fred, thank God. Anyway, they'll just rush off and steal it and bring it back. That's how they make their living.

DAK: *Tell Mark about the car.*

MARK: *What about the car?*

HENRY: The Fredmobile? Actually Fred doesn't call it the Fredmobile, Bianca does, and Fred hates that. Fred's got this real expensive car, in which they've installed this prototype he and Bianca managed to steal, this strange compact time-travel and polymorph machine. Everyone else needs a big huge ship the size of the Death Star to time travel, but their little car — about the size of a Maserati — is the only compact of its kind that can travel in time.

Actually, it only looks compact on the outside. On the inside it's huge, sort of like Dr. Who's TARDIS — his Time And Relative Dimension In Space thing. By pushing buttons you can turn it into just about anything — a huge battlecruiser, a killer robot that would make all the Transformers look like wimps, a briefcase, a pen you can stick in your pocket.

DAK: *State-of-the-art.*

MARK: *Far beyond anything seen in all those animated cartoons with robots that change into vehicles?*

HENRY: *They* can just turn into one jet plane — who cares? *We* can turn into an air force!

DAK: *(Laughter.)*

MARK: *So the Fredmobile is a force to reckon with.*

HENRY: Definitely.

MARK: *How can you hope to squeeze all these concepts into one measly issue?*

HENRY: We're good.

MARK: *Is there anything else we should know? If they're thieves, is anyone after them?*

HENRY: Is anyone after them! A better question might be, "Who *isn't* after them!"

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"They make the Transformers look like wimps."

An Intergalactic Repo Man — Fred still owes money on the car — has been after them the longest. An Interstellar Cop is after them because of all the stuff they've stolen. Most specifically, the sole existing prototype that powers Fred's car through space and time. They're also being chased by an agent from the Interstellar Revenue Service, because Fred doesn't pay taxes —

DAK: *— on any of the stuff he steals.*

HENRY: The Interstellar Revenue Service doesn't care *how* you get the stuff, but if you got it, you have to pay taxes on it — and Fred is one of those wonderful people who doesn't believe in paying taxes, so the IRS is after him across space. They've got this cold-blooded reptilian sort of guy —

MARK: *True to life.'*

HENRY: — chasing them with this huge ship that's loaded with cold emotionless robots that he uses as his enforcers.

MARK: *How did Fred hook up with Bianca?*

MARK PROPST: He stole her. *(Laughter.)*

HENRY: They probably ran into each other on a job, trying to steal the same thing.

MARK: *Lovable rogues.*

HENRY: That's the idea. They don't kill — killing is *gauche.*

MARK PROPST: They're con artists.

MARK: *Like Grace Kelly in the Alfred Hitchcock film TO CATCH A THIEF?*

HENRY: Daring, romantic, dashing. Your law-abiding citizen might not admit that he admires them, but he probably does. Fred and Bianca are very just, kind of fair-minded.

DAK: *But the cop chasing them isn't.*

HENRY: The cop is a Rambo type — big, huge, ten times taller than Fred, who's only about three feet high, and fifty times more massive. He'll come dashing in at the end of a robbery, as Fred and Bianca are making their escape. They'll have left things nice and neat — nothing messed up, and the only thing missing is what they were planning to steal — until the cop lands behind them and tears the place up, blowing innocent bystanders apart.

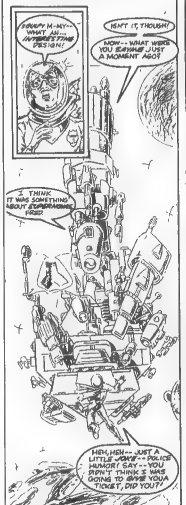
DAK: *He's the* police.

MARK: *The cop is the menace to society?*

HENRY: Right. And the Repo Man is just a big fat slob.

MARK PROPST: A used-car dealer type of guy. He travels around in something that looks like — doesn't look like, but *acts* like — an old '56 Buick, falling apart constantly. He's got to keep it together, tape it up.

MARK: *Will the Southern Knights appear in ARISTOCRATIC XTRA-TERRESTRIAL TIME-TRAVELING THIEVES #1?*


...THE FREIGHBLE IS NO MORE!
GOOPY H-HY-- WHAT AN--INTERESTING PRESENT
HEH! IT, THOUGH!
NOW-- WHAT WERE YOU SAYING...JUST A MOMENT AGO?
I'M SURE THIS WAS YOUR FIRST OFFENSE SO I'LL LET YOU OFF WITH A WARNING! BUT DON'T LET HIS CARD YOU DOING IT AGAIN, please!
WOW-- I DIDN'T KNOW THE FREIGHBILE COULD BECOME A BATTLE CRUISER! YOU ONLY SHOWED ME SMALL STUFF--
LIKE THE MILLENNIUM FALCON!
"WHAT ELSE HAVE YOU GOT PROGRAMMED INTO IT?"
I THINK IT WAS SOMETHING ABOUT SUPERMARKET VIDEO
"ALL SORTS OF NEAT STUFF, BIANCA."
"CAN IT DO HYPERSPACE?"
WOW-- VOLTRON IS SO GAUCHE! BESIDES--
--THIS CAR CAN BECOME THINGS THAT WOULD BLOW VOLTRON AWAY!
TIME TO LAY ON A COURSE FOR EARTH!
GET OUT THE ROAD-- WE'LL BE OKAY!
HEH, HEH-- JUST A LITTLE JOKE-- POLICE WOULDN'T SAY -- YOU DIDN'T THINK I WAS GOING TO GIVE YOU A TICKET, DID YOU?

HENRY: Not in this oneshot — but the X-Thieves, as we call them for short, will probably make an appearance in the SOUTHERN KNIGHTS. You may have noticed they've already met on the cover of this issue of COMICS INTERVIEW, by the way, and Kristin's not very pleased.

MARK: *It all sounds great!*

DAK: *Yeah — if these guys can do it.*

HENRY: We can do it. We just have to get everyone to buy it. Then, if they'll actually read it . . .

MARK: *Got anything else to say, Henry?*

HENRY: WE'RE NUMBER ONE!

WE'RE NUMBER ONE!

MARK: *I had to ask*

Below: Mark Propst's original X-THIEVES sketch.

© 1986 Mark Propst & Kraft

"I went from total obscurity to seeing my

DENNY O'NEIL

After catapulting to the top of the comics scene in the late Sixties with his groundbreaking "GREEN" series, Denny O'Neil turned a few heads when he left DC for Marvel Years later, the deep-thinking dramaturge has just crossed back uptown to helm some hot new DC projects . . .

DWIGHT JON ZIMMERMAN: You've been in the comic-book industry now about 20 years, haven't you?

DENNY O'NEIL: A little over 20 years.

DWIGHT: What do you see as being the biggest difference between the comic-book industry of 1965 and the industry of today?

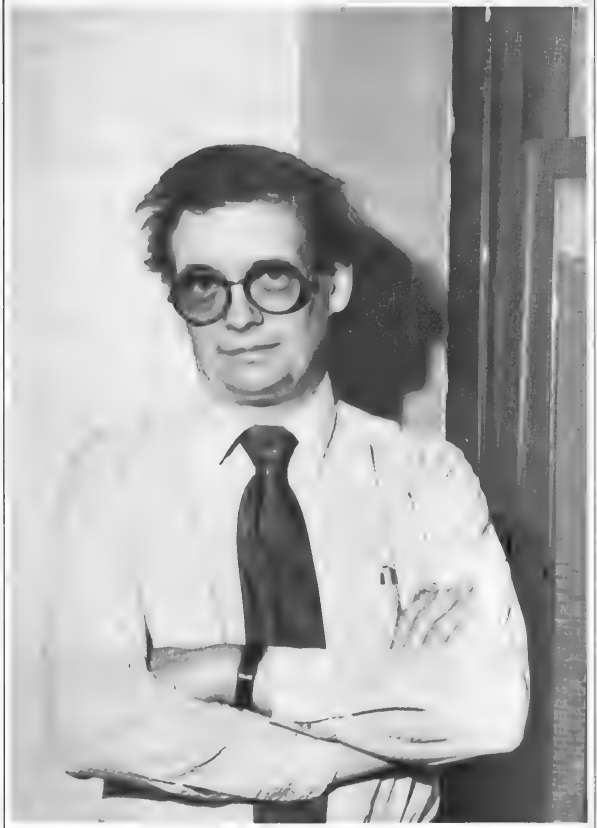
DENNY: There are a lot of differences. It's virtually a different field. The economics of it, of course, have changed vastly in the last 5 years for reasons which have been much documented elsewhere. A lot has had to do with the rise of the small comic-book shops which have made a form of competition possible which wasn't possible in the good old days — or the bad old days, depending on where you're coming from. If someone had told me 10 years ago that there would be royalties or incentive payments or creator-owned stuff, I would have laughed. But also, 10 years ago I thought I wouldn't be working in comics now because I didn't think it would be possible to make a living doing it. And actually it's possible to make a better living doing comic books than ever before. It doesn't mean that everybody does, but that the possibility is there.

And artistically — it's like I may be second generation and I'm largely working with third generation writers and artists. It has a lot to do with creators themselves recognizing comics as an art form. I think the first generation guys were very intuitive, some of them were brilliant. But, basically, they were refugees from other places. And they were kind of making it up as they went along. People like **Roy Thomas, Steve Skeates** and I are what I think of as the second generation, we grew up admiring their work and having thought about it more than they did. And we built on it. And now the third generation of people are building on what we did. They have a very different attitude which, as an editor, I find a mixed blessing. There is something to be said for the guy who only considers his work in comics a job and only does as much as is necessary because he gets it in on time. The artistic temperament doesn't want to let go of a job until it's perfect, and that can take months. We're still in a periodical medium. And as much as it kills me to enforce deadlines, I've got to. It's never been a particular problem for me as a writer because I like them. And there are a number of really creative people for

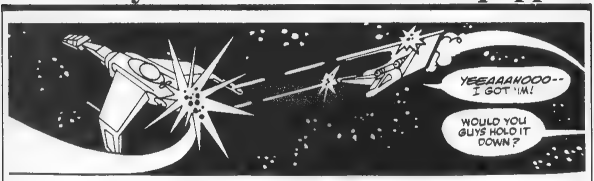
VITAL STATISTICS

Date of Birth: 3 May 1939
Hometown: St. Louis, MO
Comic Book Credits: It would take pages to list them. That makes me feel ancient.
Favorite Story Scenes You Wanted To Use But Couldn't: They are about Supergirl and the traveling salesman. Never get published, but it used to be good for laughs at parties.

name featured in the NEW YORK TIMES."



"I've always felt I'm much better equipped



whom they're not a problem, **John Byrne**, I think, may be the best example. It's like you don't have to bleed over every panel to produce genuinely good work. But I think there are some people who don't believe that. Also it's a matter of temperament. Some people are by nature fast workers and some people are by nature slow workers. It has nothing to do with quality in either direction.

DWIGHT: *What amazed me the most about comics during the Sixties was the dynamicism. It was like comics were going through a renaissance.*

DENNY: Yes, very much. Coincidentally, that's what got me into the field. I was working as a journalist and had noticed comic books reappearing in places like bus depots and other places where I hadn't seen them in a long time. And purely out of blind, silly curiosity I picked up some to read. I was making a weekly trip of 110 miles by Greyhound, so I started reading comics on the trip. And I discovered that comics were a lot more interesting than I remembered them.

DWIGHT: *Didn't the other passengers look at you a little strangely?*

DENNY: That's never bothered me. Hey, if they want to talk **Proust**, we'll talk **Proust**! (Laughter.)

DWIGHT: *Backtracking to the comics of the Forties, when I was talking to some of the creators of that time for DC's FIFTY WHO MADE DC GREAT annniversary issue, what struck me was the fact that so many science-fiction writers were writing for comics. And then what I discovered was that the attitude of a lot of people back then seemed to be "take the money and run." Many told me they saw comics as a stepping stone to something else. Some even got involved in comics by accident. But that they stayed in comics for as many years as they did was not in their original plans.*

DENNY: Well, comics were a compromise for a lot of those guys when the magazine market dried up, as it did very rapidly following World War II. They had to go somewhere.

DWIGHT: *How did you get into the industry?*

DENNY: It's a story I've told a lot. I had to fill up the youth page every second week for this newspaper I worked on, which was difficult to do in the summer because there were no school activities — there were no obvious stories to write. So having seen comics come back and having read some myself and actively enjoyed them, I decided to do a story about the renaissance of comics. So I wrote some letters and got some replies and cobbled together a story that grew into three stories.

Somewhere in there **Roy Thomas** got in touch with me — his parents happened to be subscribers to the paper. So the third story was an interview with Roy, who was at that time a teacher at Fox High School in South St. Louis but had already begun his comic-book career. He had sold a couple of stories and was on the verge of moving to New York City. So my third piece was a "local boy does something interesting" kind of thing. Roy moved to New York, lasted at DC a week or two, then went to work for **Stan Lee** at Marvel. Marvel at the time was in the process of exploding. Roy sent me the Marvel Writer's Test which I did, kind of as a joke. I had a couple of hours on a Tuesday afternoon with nothing to do, so instead of doing crossword puzzles, I did the writer's test. It took me about an hour.

To my surprise, a week after I had sent it back to him, Roy called with a job offer. I stewed about that for a day and decided in my time-honored blind impulse tradition to take it. I wrote a letter of resignation to my editor at the paper, packed my car and drove to New York.

DWIGHT: *The first story I remember you did was a Doctor Strange story drawn by Dan Adkins in STRANGE TALES.*

DENNY: First, I did Doc Strange with **Steve Ditko** and the late, wonderful **Bill Everett** and then Dan. I was also doing MILLIE THE MODEL and Westerns and whatever was around to do. It was very much a learning process. I can look back on some of that stuff and cringe. Back then I had no notion of technique. I wouldn't have known it if it had bit me.

FLYNN CATCHES YOU IN THE SIMULATOR DOING THIS KIND OF STUFF, HE'LL GROUND YOU FOR LIFE! OR LONGER!
OUR DEAR SISTER'S RIGHT, MIKEY-- DARN IT!

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for failure than I am for success."

When I do look back at those early stories, they all seem like they were written by somebody else.

DWIGHT: *Do you find yourself periodically going back to those old stories?*

DENNY: No, not really. If something gets reprinted, I will flip through it. But it's a bad idea, it really is. So many guys get trapped in former glories. It's a bad mental state for any creative person to sort of lift his ego by dwelling on past successes. It's equally bad to dwell on past failures.

DWIGHT: *Well, you had one huge past success with all the attention paid to your work with Neal Adams on GREEN LANTERN AND GREEN ARROW. The publicity on that alone must have been a mind-blowing experience*

DENNY: Yes, it was pretty heady. I went from total obscurity to seeing my name featured in the NEW YORK TIMES and being invited to do talk shows. It's by no means an unmixed blessing. That messed up my head pretty thoroughly for a couple of years. I've seen that same sort of thing happen to others. For some reason, quick success in the comic-book field has a very negative effect on people it happens to. Most of them come out of it, fortunately. One guy that I know well even observed it in others and was all armored for it, and it still happened to him.

DWIGHT: *I can imagine it would. Suddenly you find yourself featured in THE NEW YORK TIMES, the media is calling for you. It would be hard to resist the influence of all that attention*

DENNY: I've always felt that because of problems of low self-esteem, I'm much better equipped for failure than I am for success. And there was a part of me that didn't handle success at all well

DWIGHT: *What happened?*

DENNY: Deteriorating marriage, bad habits, deteriorating relationships with human beings — with anything that wasn't a typewriter, in fact. It was a bad few years there.

DWIGHT: *Did your work suffer as well?*

DENNY: Definitely. There was one period of stories that I will never reread. I had a few years there where my ex- wife said that I was distinguishable from the Bowery bums only by address. I always did have it together enough to work the three or four hours a day it was necessary to meet my commitments but I think the quality of my work deteriorated markedly during that time.

DWIGHT: *To stay with your GREEN LANTERN AND GREEN ARROW stories for a little longer, when I recently reread those stories in the fancy reprint format, I got the feeling that the characters in them seemed to be less characters than they were vehicles for ideas.*

DENNY: I don't think I'll cop to that, but if it's true, then it's a failure of craft because always we were interested in entertainment. I think there was only one time that I lost sight of that. Now I'm not fond of all of those stories. I did reread them when DC reprinted them a couple of years ago.

DWIGHT: *The new book about comics, THE COMIC BOOK HEROES by Jacobs and Jones spent a whole chapter on GL/GA.*

DENNY: Yeah, I saw that! They didn't send me a copy, the rats. But I noticed they quoted me.

DWIGHT: *They stated that they series "broke all tradition" and talked a lot about the social issues. But there's a part I wonder if you'd like to comment on To quote: "By the end of the series, Green Arrow had become a screaming pontificator, and Green Lantern a whimpering, manic- depressive loser."*

DENNY: Who said that? I did or they did?

DWIGHT: *They did.*

DENNY: Well, they'd better never cross in front of a car I'm driving. Clearly I don't agree.

DWIGHT: *What was your purpose in setting up these two different personalities as a team?*

DENNY: Well, my journalism background and laid-back social activism had led me to wonder if I couldn't combine those things with what I did for a living. Actually, I had already made some tentative steps towards that goal while I was working for Charlton as Sergius

Denny and June (POWER PACK) Brigman's adaptation of YOUNG ASTRONAUTS, for Marvel.

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"I don't work well without deadlines."

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An interesting logic twist from GL/GA #78, repackaged by DC in 1983.

O'Shaugnessy. Ol' Sergius wrote a story called "Children of Doom" which is a very rough draft of the kind of thing I would do with GREEN LANTERN AND GREEN ARROW. The way the Green series happened was they came to me and said that this comic was not doing very well and asked me if there was anything I'd like to try with the title. So this was my chance to see if this idea I had would work. It was a situation where nobody had anything to lose. And I think that writing about things that really concerned me pulled out of me a higher level of craft. Also, it gave me real problems to solve in terms of craft which I hadn't faced before. Sometimes it's good to get challenged like that — to get slapped across the face and woken up. So I think that's what happened. I wrote the first story assuming that **Gil Kane** would do it. Somewhere in there Gil got lost and **Neal Adams** got found. When I saw the artwork, it exceeded my expectations. I think that provided the impetus for a lot of our subsequent success — to go on and do the other stories as well as the first, then to top ourselves. We were feeding off of each other and feeding off of the tremendous amount of enthusiasm. And having a sense that maybe we were doing something with the format that hadn't been done before, which was very exciting.

DWIGHT: *But your primary thing was to do the best kind of story you could?*

DENNY: Yes, and all other things being equal, creative people generally perform better if they have a genuine emotional commitment to the material.

DWIGHT: *Keeping on that idea for a while, do you also think that creative people also tend to produce their best work or better work, if they are in a negative work situation rather than if they are given carte blanche?*

DENNY: I can't speak for everybody. That's one of those questions for which there is no blanket answer. It depends on the people — it always depends on

"BAT LASH was as close to a charm-

WOMEN! THEY'RE NOTHIN' BUT GRIEF AND WOE... I NO SOONER MEET SOME SOFT, SWEET FILLY THAN IT'N UP TO MY EYEBROWS IN VIOLENCE!
ME--! THE MOST PEACE-LOVIN' SOUL WEST OF THE PECOS!
I SWEAR IT'S GOTTA BE THE FEMALES' FAULT! EVERYBODY KNOWS WE LAGHES ARE A PEACE-LOVIN' LOT TO WOMEN!

"WILL HE SAVE THE WEST — OR RUIN IT?" BAT LASH, a comic ahead of its time. Art by Nick Cardy.

the individual. I don't work particularly well without deadlines, without some kind of pressure. I think if I didn't have deadlines stuck into my life artificially I'd have to create them for myself. Deadlines don't bother me much or often. I've lived with them for over 25 years now.

DWIGHT: *Well, not just deadlines, but I was thinking of situations like what happened with Jim Starlin when he was doing WARLOCK. It seemed like because he was having so many editorial problems, he was challenged to produce the work he did.*

DENNY: Oh, yeah. I think it was the composer **Virgil Thompson** who said you need walls to push against. And I think that's what you're talking about.

DWIGHT: *Yeah, I am.*

DENNY: As far as GREEN LANTERN AND GREEN ARROW is concerned my editor was very supportive. But they were comic books and they were also Code comic books. As such there were built-in restrictions or boundaries that we did have to push against or figure out ways to go around. But it's ever thus in this medium. **Raymond Chandler** said, "The trick is to give them what they want and get what you want into it, too." I've never heard it expressed better.

DWIGHT: *In an earlier talk we had, you mentioned that when you were an editor at DC, you met Batman co-creator Bill Finger. Did you get to know him very well during those last years of his life?*

DENNY: No, I didn't. I went out drinking with him maybe once or twice, talked to him, and then got swept up in editorial duties that tended to make me not talk to him at length when he called. That's a regret I'll carry to my grave with me. That was about the last year of his life and I should have been a lot nicer to him and fought a lot harder to get him work.

DWIGHT: *On a different DC subject, I want to tell you that I loved your BAT LASH stories*

DENNY: I loved them, too!

DWIGHT: *I thought they were some of the best stuff I had ever seen in comics.*

DENNY: I can crow about BAT LASH a lot because I really didn't have all that much to do with it. **Sergio Aragones** wrote the actual stories, in his inimitable **Sergio** thumbnail sketch form. I came in after that was done and did the finished dialog. I felt it was a terrific combination. And then **Nick Cardy** did the finishes, rendering **Sergio's** cartoons into that real pretty, slick art he was doing. That was a wonderful package. I wonder how it would do today with a more sophisticated audience? Of course, in those days we were never sure why anything was canceled. We were always told low sales, but I have reason to believe that wasn't the case with BAT LASH. It only went 7 issues, of which I wrote 6. But it was a wonderful project to work on.

DWIGHT: *I felt that in a strange way BAT LASH seemed ahead of its time.*

DENNY: Absolutely. He was a charming anti-hero, or as close to a charming anti-hero as comics ever came — at least as we did him. In subsequent handlings Bat Lash became a churlish anti-hero. **Sergio** and I tried to make him in the tra-

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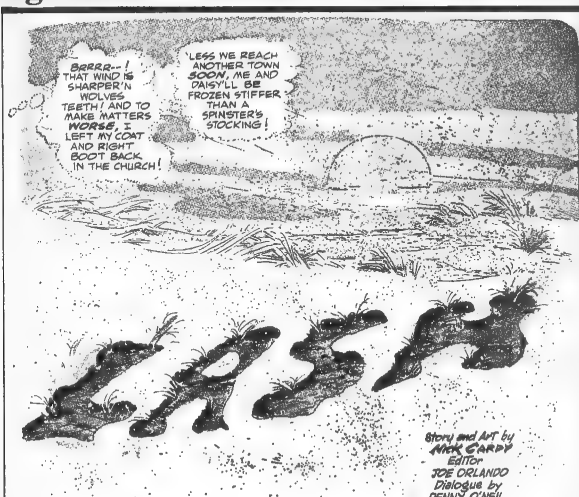
ing anti-hero as comics ever came."


BRRRR--! THAT WIND IS SHARPER'N WOLVES' TEETH! AND TO MAKE MATTERS WORSE, I LEFT MY COAT AND RIGHT BOOT BACK IN THE CHURCH!
LESS WE REACH ANOTHER TOWN SOON, ME AND DAISY'LL BE FROZEN STIFFER THAN A SPINSTER'S STOCKING!
Story and Art by NICK CARDY
Editor JOE ORLANDO
Dialogue by DENNY O'NEIL

dition of the charming rogue. Bat had a conscience represented by the flower in his hat which he inevitably threw away whenever he was doing something ratty.

DWIGHT: *Comparing your GREEN LANTERN AND GREEN ARROW stories and the heavy way you were presenting your themes — the phrase "hadling with a trowel" comes to mind — with BAT LASH. The themes were a lot more understated, but I felt they were actually presented more effectively.*

DENNY: Possibly — I have evolved into that approach to storytelling almost completely. It was interesting, in BAT LASH and in BATMAN, both, I was really telling stories. Perhaps that is the right way to do it. I should say that I don't feel that the GREEN LANTERN AND GREEN ARROW stories were always successful but I'm very glad we tried them. Every once in a while you should push to the limit.

DWIGHT: *Because you became, for a brief while, a media-figure of sorts, have you ever had the urge to contact THE NEW YORK TIMES and find out what kind of obituary they've written about you?*

DENNY: Good God! What a question! It's never occurred to me! There probably isn't one, and if there is, I don't want to know what it says.

DWIGHT: *What were your feelings when you were offered the scripting job of IRON MAN at Marvel?*

DENNY: Initially I was offered to fill-in. **Jim Salicrup**, who was the editor of it then, needed an issue or two done. I knocked out a couple of scripts, not having feelings about them one way or the other. Iron Man has never been a real big favorite of mine though I did read the series in the Sixties.

DWIGHT: *Had you read any of the Michelinie stories?*

DENNY: Yeah, somebody had told me the series was getting real good, so I was reading the **David Michelinie, John Romita, Jr.** and **Bob Layton** stories. And I agree, I think they were a high-water mark of the series.

DWIGHT: *How much did you integrate your own experiences with Tony Stark's problems when you became the regular scripter?*

DENNY: Well, as with the other socially conscious stuff, what we said about the alcohol problem was true. That may be the most thoroughly researched comic-book series in history. Tony Stark hits bottom. I know lots of addicts I have a lot of personal experience in that area. So a lot of real-life stuff went into that part of it.

DWIGHT: *What do you feel was your low point, professionally?*

DENNY: There have been a few of them. I guess that period in the mid-Seventies. I was working on craft alone for a few years. I would like to say that I'm a complete professional and that I do — I always try to do as well as I can at the time. But it's the nature of the beast that you are better at some times than at others. And there was something about the comic-book environment at that time that was not moving me or, I think, very many people — to try anything real

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"Editing Miller's DAREDEVIL was a joy."

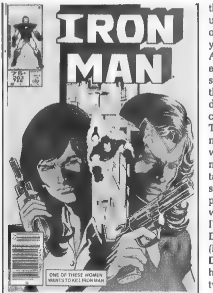
good. There was no particularly good creative impulse. There was no real reason, either interior or exterior, to give it maximum pride. Pretty early on I realized I'd have to be pretty productive. I would have to be a prolific writer to make a living at this. So I began paying a lot of attention to craft and technique knowing that I'd not be inspired every time out, but feeling that I'd have to come up with a way to at least write an acceptable story two, three, four times a month.

DWIGHT: *What do you think has been your greatest success, then?*

DENNY: That's something that I don't think too much about. Professionally, I liked some of the Batman stories, one called "The Vow from the Grave". I think is a very good example of comic-book technique: it's a pure story, no axes to grind except to solve the problem either set by myself or **Julie Schwartz**, who was the editor of BATMAN then — to do a classic detective story in 17 pages. The problem there is that there's no room for red herrings or any of the trappings of a traditional detective story. So I like that. I liked the BAT LASH stuff. As editor of the **Miller** DAREDEVIL stories — that was a large joy. But good stories were done in a way no differently than the ones that aren't so good. The situation is, "I have this or any to do this month, how can I best do it?"

DWIGHT: *How about personal success?*

DENNY: Well, without getting too heavy with the violins, a doctor told me when I was 37 that I'd be dead by age 40 because of the life I was leading. Obviously at 46 I'm still breathing.



DWIGHT: *But you changed your lifestyle?*

DENNY: Oh, yes. And I have a kid that I'm very proud of. He's 19.

DWIGHT: *What do you think has been the greatest negative influence on comics?*

DENNY: Sheee! That's a toughie! Well, let me give a few choices there. The main thing I think has been the people who are in charge of them. Not at the editorial end, but above that. And that is also not entirely true anymore, even with the big companies, and not at all with any of the small ones. But, in the past, people who owned the companies had no respect for them, considered them less than garbage, throwaways. I remember that up until pretty recently all artwork was thrown away. I got a bunch of it at home that I didn't steal, because somebody at the office saw that it was going to be thrown away, and felt that it was better for me to have it than for it to fall into the trash can.

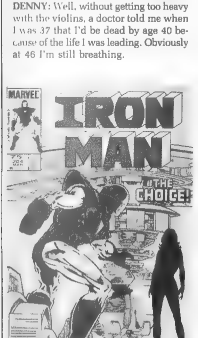
In some cases that lack of respect is still around, too, because I still hear some executives who boast, "I never read the junk."

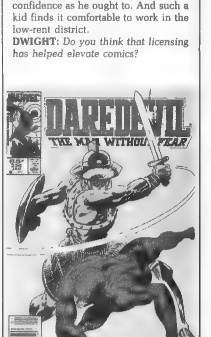
The creative people have too often allowed themselves to be kicked around. They reflected the attitude of the owners and had a feeling of inferiority about what they did. Or in the case of some people who were coming into the field about 7 or 8 years after I did, were so delighted to draw the characters that they allowed themselves to be pushed around more than an equivalent worker in another field would have. Anybody who has really looked at and studied them has discovered that comics are a unique form of communication which occasionally become art. Which is all you can say about any popular form. And yet the attitude of the public tended to be that comics were literature for sub-literates — if you couldn't handle the words, you had the pictures. They didn't realize that pictures and copy combine to form a unique language. There are two components to comics. It's not that you need pictures as a gloss on words. By and large even now, though not as much as 20 years ago, when you talk to people outside the industry . . . in some cases when I'm introduced to people and they're told what I do, I'm hit with the attitude that they've surprised I'm civilized.

DWIGHT: *Look! He doesn't drool! (Laughter.)*

DENNY: He's no hunchback, isn't a pinhead . . . speaks in words of more than two syllables. The economics of comic publishing have worked against it so much that I'm not sure it will ever find its full potential. There's a lot of negative stuff which is changing but not as fast as I thought it would be, which again is a mixed blessing. I kind of like working below the salt. I like working in something that is so "disrespectable" that there are no expectations for it. That kind of frees me. As I said, underneath this suave Manhattan veneer is a kid who really doesn't have as much self-confidence as he ought to. And such a kid finds it comfortable to work in the low-rent district.

DWIGHT: *Do you think that licensing has helped elevate comics?*





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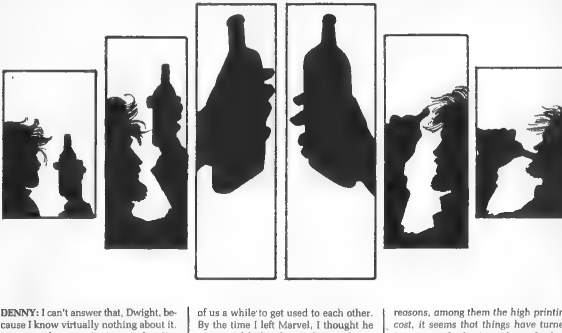
"I don't feel like jousting with Groth."



DENNY: I can't answer that, Dwight, because I know virtually nothing about it. I suspect the opposite is true, but I'm really talking out of my ear on that. I know that occasionally creative decisions have not been implemented because they were afraid that the decisions would step on some licensors' toes. I know that in some instances people have caved in, to television networks in particular. The people in comics made compromises they really didn't need to make. Obviously, I'm not going to mention names, but I remember a guy from television a few years ago who pointed out that a certain show was worse than it needed to be because nobody simply said, "No, we'd rather not do this thing you want." Which is apparently all it would have taken.

DWIGHT: *At Marvel, you hired as your assistant someone outside the industry, Jon Daly. Could you tell us why and how you came to select him rather than someone who had followed comics for years?*

DENNY: Well, with Don — you go on gut feelings. A guy can talk a great game and not deliver. The selection process had narrowed down to about 6 contenders. I didn't know who to pick. I eliminated some because I know them well enough to know that the chemistry between us wasn't good enough — when you work 4 feet away from somebody for 40 hours and more a week, you have to get along. So I — Don had called several times, obviously he wanted the job. And enthusiasm is always a plus. So I called him up and hired him. And for the first week thought, "God! I've made a mistake!" *(Laughter.)* It took both of us a while to get used to each other. By the time I left Marvel, I thought he was one of the best human beings I know — a terrific guy and a great assistant. I think he's got more editorial skills now than some people who are full editors.

DWIGHT: *I'd like to ask you some questions about your opinions of the fan press, now. The fan press has really evolved a lot since the Sixties from the small publications...*

DENNY: The hectograph things with the staples, yeah.

DWIGHT: *Right. Now for a variety of reasons, among them the high printing cost, it seems that things have turned into more a fan business than a fan hobby. Do you think in its present form the fan press is a help to the industry?*

DENNY: You always have to make individual calls. I think some fan publications are, and that others are a hindrance.

DWIGHT: *And they are?*

DENNY: I will go on record as to what I like a lot. I think **Don** and **Maggie Thompson** really do a good job supplying pros with the closest thing we have to a trade paper. Their background is in journalism and it shows. They're interested in getting the story and even though they do have axes to grind they are clearly labeled. Their editorials are signed columns. And though occasionally I have been on the bad end of their criticism, that's a perfectly valid and legitimate thing for them to do. I have no problems with that. I think they do a good job with THE COMICS BUYER'S GUIDE

DWIGHT: *Do you think the fan press helps elevate the industry?*

DENNY: That's a tough one. Let me think about that for a second. *(Pause.)* Let me answer it like this, which is a kind of long way around things. If the proposition that criticism is beneficial to an art form is true, applied to any art form, then it's true of comics. I have some pretty severe reservations about that — and the older I get the more reservations I have about that way of approaching the artistic experience for anybody in any art at any level. But let us for the sake of argument say that it is a good thing. Articulate, well-formed criti-

Tony (IRON MAN) Stark hits rock bottom. "This may be the most thoroughly researched comic in history," says Denny.

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"I was labeled an anti-intellectual!"

cism is probably helping the people in the industry think more about their craft.

DWIGHT: *Yeah, though I've felt that the pontificating in THE COMICS JOURNAL, for instance, sounded more like the chafing of elitist diaper rash than anything else.*

DENNY: Well, I don't feel like jousting very much with **Gary Groth** again. Let us remember that in one of his recent editorials, I was labeled as a virulent anti-intellectual! *(Laughter.)* I was almost flattered! I never thought I came on that strong in any department. I obviously think that **Gary's** approach is wrong. I think that it's against anything that mainstream comics will do. Once again, I cite his favorite critic is **John Simon** who, I think, is biased against movies. In his last collection, I think 15% of the reviews were favorable. I think maybe that if you don't really like an art form, you should just shut up about it.

The guy who used to do movie critism for ESQUIRE, years ago. **Dwight McDonald**... he was primarily a political commentator, a radical left type...

DWIGHT: *The only movie critic I really follow is Pauline Kael.*

DENNY: She is really tough on movies, but she obviously loves them. She's an example of a good, hard critic. Anyway, this guy **McDonald**, I remember his farewell column. He said that after attending 10 to 12 movies a week for the last 10 years, "I no longer know what I like, so I have no business writing this column any more." I was impressed by his integrity. I think that **Gary** and the gang he influences clearly don't like comics — don't like super heroes and don't like what the creators are attempting to do. And I think that it really sticks out in everything he writes. I didn't quite understand the attack on me. And I confess that I didn't read it assiduously. I smiled when somebody pointed that phrase out when I scanned it. But I had the feeling he was attacking some columns I wrote which questioned the kind of criteria that are applied to movies. That was something I had to question, writing that column. I came to think that we're working with outmoded paradigmes. For example, in the early days of movie criticism, most of the people critiquing movies looked at them as photographed stage plays. I think it was only in the late Thirties and Forties that a few people changed that... **James Agee** comes to mind, **Manny Farber**, there are more but their names escape me at the moment. Anyway, they began to realize that movies were a different thing. They had to look at the medium with different eyes. It's time to reevaluate again because movies are no longer events, they're so common that they've become, in effect, environment. Similiarly, I think that by-and-large the comics critics are still criticising short stories and movies. I don't have an answer for them. I don't know how they should approach comics. But I have a feeling that with film, television and comics, nobody is using the right critical standards. Or if they are, I haven't encountered them.

DWIGHT: *The Europeans, meanwhile, have embraced comics as if they were their own. The French, in particular, have really gone hog wild about comics.*

DENNY: And are not fond of super heroes, somebody just came back from France not too long ago and told me — in fact, it was you! *(Laughter.)*

DWIGHT: *With a French wife, I find I have a compelling reason to go over there every so often. Whenever I do well, to use that Southern phrase, I'm in hog-heaven.*

DENNY: People who have traveled in the Orient, musican friends, have brought back for me examples of what those publishers are doing. There are virtually no home-grown super heroes there, either.

The French have a long history of seeing merit in American popular culture that is considered beneath contempt here. They were the first ones to glom onto studio movies, people like **Howard Hawks**, *film noir*.

And jazz — Le Jazz Hot in 1939. I have one of the records from that time, and it's wonderful stuff. That was during the time when jazz was pretty much considered whorehouse music.

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DWIGHT: *I'm waiting for us here to have a Russ Meyer film retrospective similar to the one they had in Paris just a couple years ago.*

DENNY: That's one place where the French and I would part. *(Laughter.)* I've seen some of **Russ Meyer's** movies and can be amused by them but — because he's so blatant — I wouldn't take a feminist there on a first date.

DWIGHT: *Unless you wanted to make an unforgettable impression. The only French super hero that I ran across is actually one that pokes fun at the genre, SUPER DUPONT. But, to move on to another subject, you're now at DC. What books are you handling?*

DENNY: Well, as of today, right now this minute, it's BATMAN, DETECTIVE, FIRESTORM, WARLORD and a bunch of graphic novels. There will probably be more titles added. Figuring the number of titles they publish and the number of editors they have, I think I'm due for one or two more.

DWIGHT: *Do you anticipate doing any writing in the near future for them as well?*

DENNY: Definitely. I found this out about myself when I first went to work at Marvel: I write. I tried not to for about 6 months. Writing had been a way of making a living for me ever since I was 22 years old. And I didn't know if I really liked doing it anymore. I found out that I did by not doing it for a while. I'm not anxious to jump into anything. I have been for the past several years producing a lot of copy. And a little breather might be in order.

I'm still working on finishing up some assignments I'd gotten previously. And a friend is talking about doing a little television work with me. I think certainly fairly soon I'll accept a regular assignment from DC because basically I like doing it. I like meeting a monthly deadline.

DWIGHT: *Are there any pet projects or ideas that you'd like to do in comics that haven't been done?*

DENNY: Oh, always. I've some ideas for new kinds of heroes. I was tending a little bit in that direction with DAREDEVIL. Had I kept writing it, I would have tried. Those are not conceptualized enough for me to be very articulate about them, but I think they spring from my reading of a lot of Asian philosophy. That kind of thing.

Something occurred to me yesterday, **Jim Aparo** and I did a character for Charlton called Wander, way back in the Sixties. I imagine DC owns him. I don't know if I could bring off Wander any more, but it'd be fun to try. Maybe as a graphic novel. I would like to try taking a shot at doing one of **Julie Schwartz'** science-fiction adaptations. All of that stuff notwithstanding, I imagine that I

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much considered whorehouse music."

will soon be back in harness writing a monthly comic.

DWIGHT: *What would you say is the biggest difference between Marvel and DC?*

DENNY: I really haven't been at DC very long, now, so consequently that would be very tough to answer. The problems each company has are different, almost diametrically opposite. The atmosphere here is a lot different. I'm not making value judgements here about good and bad, I'm just saying different.

DWIGHT: *Well, each company has its own identity.*

DENNY: Yes, very very plainly. Which is weird because there has been such a cross-pollination of talent in the last 10 years. Everybody has worked for one company or the other, frequently in fairly prestigious positions. But still DC remains DC and Marvel remains Marvel. I'm now trying to adjust to coming up to Fifth Avenue and 53rd Street. Blue-collar kid that I am, anything much above 23rd Street and I get the "bends" — that's the wrong metaphor, but —

DWIGHT: *Are you still bicycling to work, like you did at Marvel?*

DENNY: Well, not in this weather, but I will when the weather turns nice again. I've always felt out of place on Fifth Avenue. Perhaps I'll adjust to it easier this time. I've lived in lower Manhattan for many years, frequently in the less choice sections.

DWIGHT: *Same here. I used to live on the Lower East Side. On the day that I moved from there to Brooklyn, during that morning I saw within a couple hours of each other, a drug transaction and a bust.*

DENNY: The former missus, child and I were sort of priding ourselves on how tough and street-smart we had gotten. Now I realize that we had paid a tremendous price for living there. There was constant tension — you could never relax.

DWIGHT: *We've digressed pretty far away from talk about the comic-book companies, there. When you mentioned the cross-pollination of talent — some people are now simultaneously working for both Marvel and DC and for the smaller companies. Years ago, that couldn't have happened, unless someone used a pen name.*

DENNY: This is going to be a tough one to say right. Probably, by and large, it is a good idea to stick with one company. However, the fact that it is now possible for people not to do that is healthy. What it may mean is a decreasing of the slave mentality that I mentioned before. Creative people begin to recognize their worth. At one time it was so extreme at DC that you didn't even work for another editor within the company. I think I was one of the first writers of any significance to break that mold, in that I was working for at least **Julie Schwartz** and **Murray Boltinoff** simultaneously. And occasionally I'd accept an assignment from **Joe Orlando** or whoever. But I think in the old days you were known as "Julie's writer" or "Mort's writer" or "Murray's writer" and didn't even try and go fish in other waters unless you were out of assignments.

DWIGHT: *What do you think is the proper function of an editor?*

DENNY: In one sentence, it's to make the creative people look good. If I had my way, my name would not appear in the credits because I'm supposed to be the invisible man of the operation. I have no objection to my name appearing as writer on my work. As editor, though, I'd like to be unknown. First, readers should be looking at the story, second, at the artist and writer.

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"Our book was seized by U.S.Customs

BERND METZ

Like many Americans, you may have first heard of Catalan Communications through last year's precedent-breaking seizure of SQUEAK THE MOUSE by a U.S. Customs agent at Kennedy Airport. Though Catalan's growing list of titles is currently more popular in Europe, publisher Bernd Metz is busy gearing up to expand his share of the "not-for-kids" comics market . . .

BRUCE SWEENEY: *Bernd, could you tell us a little about your background and how you got into publishing?*

BERND METZ: Ever since my third year at the University of Chicago, I have worked in or with the publishing industry. I started at the University of Chicago Press in 1967 as an editorial assistant for a zoological journal. The University of Chicago Press is a small, prestigious, scholarly publishing house and I was trained by moving through almost all of the departments.

I left the U of C press in 1970 because I had gone as far as I could go there at Assistant Advertising Manager at 26. I realized that I could make more working as a freelance editor, proofreader, indexer for them and other publishers in the Midwest.

Once on my own, I used all my contacts to get freelance work and gradually specialized in indexing non-fiction books. There wasn't enough work to keep me busy in Chicago, so I moved to New York, where there was so much that after a few years I had several assistants and we ground out indexes like a little factory — my reputation for being accomplished at this skill grew fast and wide.

As I was doing all these indexes, I was also assisting the USA representative of a Spanish art agency, S.I. Artists, located in Barcelona and headed by **Josep Toutain**. In 1974, his representative left the agency and I took over the USA representation. I ran the art agency successfully for several years, took on a partner, **Herb Spiers**, and basically served the publishing market — mass market paperbacks — with cover art. The artists in this agency were all Spaniards, most of them were also doing comic-book art for European magazines and books — all under the direction of **Mr. Toutain**. The artists working for America also did covers and art for Warren magazines and HEAVY METAL.

Mr. Toutain — the prime mover in all this — had started a second company in Spain to publish magazines and books and we all knew that it was just a matter of time before the venture would spread to America just as his art agency had done in the late Sixties.

BRUCE: *Could you tell us a bit of how Catalan Communications came to be?*

BERND: My role and interest in the art agency was changing, the country was in a recession and there was little work for the artists or their agents in the early Eighties. The three partners, **Mr. Spiers**, **Mr. Toutain** and I met in April of 1983 and decided to start a second company, a publishing company which would publish "the best European and American artists in quality productions."

We started with producing and marketing **Corben**'s MUTANT WORLD for him, under his imprint of Fantagor Press. The success with this first book was fast and easy but it was another six months before we published our second book, ANARCOMA. The lag in production, combined with the reluctance of the market to accept ANARCOMA in spite of rave reviews, nearly led to a quick collapse.

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Bernd Metz
Born: 17 February 1944 — Dusseldorf, Germany
Residence: New York City
Training: University of Chicago, 8 years
Favorite Movie: BERLIN ALEXANDERPLATZ
Favorite Artist. Milo Manara

— not like the Fifties, with the F.B.I!"

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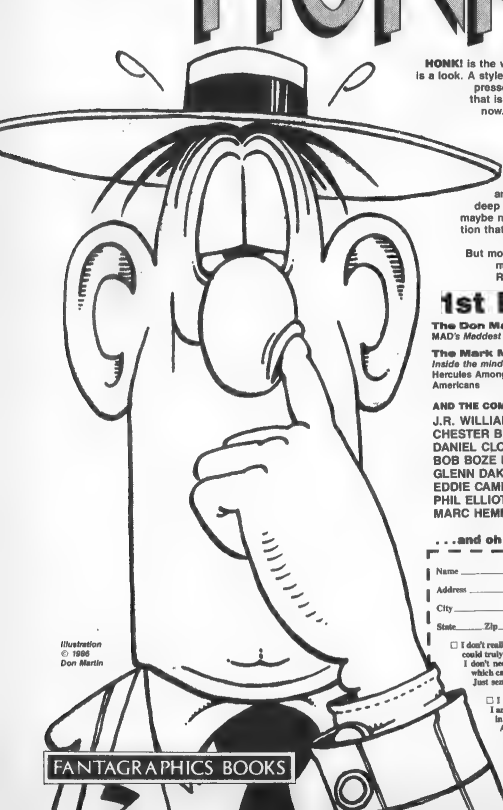

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"Corben's MUTANT WORLD is in a third printing."

The steamy Anarcoma, from ANARCOMA, Catalan's second-published title.

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It was not until the two **Corben** DEN titles and **Liberatore's** RANXEROX were published that I finally felt more secure. MUTANT WORLD is now in its third printing, now under our own imprint.

I knew from the beginning that the fans were behind us, that we were doing the right thing. In the meanwhile, the mail list keeps growing — new fans discovering our books for the first time and ordering every book on the list!

BRUCE: *It's heartening to hear of your successes. What do you feel are the key factors?*

BERND: I attribute our success to: (1) The quality of the art, writing and production of our books. We offer an alternative to fans who have gone as far as they can go with mainstream comics. (2) Printing in Europe where it's possible to produce small press runs economically and (3) keeping all costs to the bare minimum. . . no one would believe our small operating budget!

The next test for Catalan is just down the road as we have to expand operations in direct proportion to the increase in sales. . . a delicate balancing act. We are computerizing all aspects of the operation now and will move the business — at least the inventory — out of my house and into a warehouse.

We are still a long way from being profitable enough to capitalize production beyond one title a month, though I hope that by mid-1986 the list will expand to 24 titles a year. While I can't tell people how many copies we print of each book, I can tell them that it is nowhere near the number people might think.

The USA is backwards in this market. Consider that one of our books, CLICK! by **Milo Manara** has sold over 100,000 copies in France and while our edition is selling well by comparison to our other titles, the USA sales will not even reach 10% of the French edition. All our artists — **Corben** included — sell better in Europe than they do here.

BRUCE: *What do you see as the main reason for that?*

BERND: The main reason for this is sex. I could go on at length about this but won't, except to say that for a free country, the USA certainly maintains a rigid censorship in all art forms. The recent case of SQUEAK THE MOUSE is the most visible example — though America's past, with its Comics Code, the Fifties mentality, and our Puritan upbringing in general, have made it difficult to enjoy sex as a simple part of life. The very fact that we have to label our books as "adults only" is a case in point.

I certainly don't want kids reading our books. On the other hand, all sex is not

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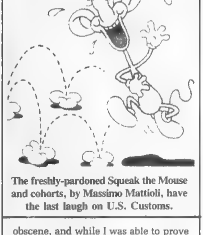
"All sex is not obscene — I proved it!"



The freshly-pardoned Squeak the Mouse and cohorts, by Massimo Mattioli, have the last laugh on U.S. Customs.

obscene, and while I was able to prove this in a federal court just a month ago, the very fact that the government spent the time and money to try a book of cartoons on an obscenity charge because some cartoon animals screw around is a frightening reality.

BRUCE: *The issue that thrust you into the news was the seizure on August 1, 1985, of SQUEAK THE MOUSE by U.S. Customs on an obscenity charge. Could you give us some insight into this situation?*

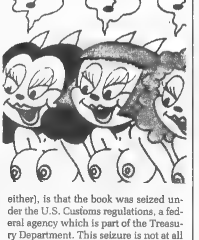
BERND: In my opinion it was a fluke that this book was seized, though lucky, too. Had it been ANARCOMA or CLICK! I would have had a much more difficult time with the jury, though I think that I would have won those cases, too. All of our books come through the same Customs jurisdiction at Kennedy Airport so I think that they will now think twice before stopping one of them.

I can understand exactly how it happened: the Customs agent saw the book and her gut reaction was: "Comic book. Mouse. Kids!" She thought that this book would go to kids. Under the Customs law, she had every right and cause to stop it. Her superiors, however, should have reversed her decision and passed the book without referring it to the Justice Department. Even then, the Justice Department could have wisely said that this would have been a waste of the taxpayer's money and that certainly compared to what one can buy on every street corner, this cartoon book was not obscene, but they didn't and in fact did the opposite.

I was at first confident of victory but after the first day of trial realized that I had again overestimated the intelligence of the average citizen and that most people would not, of course, understand this book as art, as a parody, as an amusing diversion. If most people thought like that...hell...I'd be making millions. No, the jury hated the book and truly believed that it was for some weirdo who got off looking at cartoons with "real sex and violence" as opposed to the normal person who just looks at photographs! They couldn't find the book obscene however, because it failed the third test of the law...the **Miller** test as its called...in that it did not exceed the community standards.

Anyway, I think that I did the right thing in fighting this case. If I hadn't, all future books would be open to the same fate. Luckily, this all happened at a time when sales were good enough that I could divert funds to the legal fees. The fans have been very supportive — sending in not only the extra four dollars to cover the price increase on SQUEAK but many of them sending more and all of them sending a note of congratulations.

One thing which I should clarify (as others have not realized this point



either), is that the book was seized under the U.S. Customs regulations, a federal agency which is part of the Treasury Department. This seizure is not at all like the book bannings and burnings of the Fifties when the FBI and local authorities were involved, hunting down things published and sold in this country. Had I printed SQUEAK at a USA printer, for example, and sold it, it would not have been a problem. The problem arose because it came across a border and the interpretation of the Customs Code, by *one* inspector, was that it was obscene. Granted that this is all part of a general spirit of conservatism in this country, it is *not*, in my opinion, part of a government conspiracy or policy to hunt down subversive literature.

BRUCE: *I know that you appealed to other publishers as well as fans when these difficulties broke. What was the general upshot of that?*

BERND: My appeal for support directly to the fans came after I sent a letter to about 30 publishers explaining what had happened, appealing for solidarity and asking for a donation to a battle which I thought I was waging on behalf of all. Apparently, very few thought that a loss or victory in this battle would have a wider effect on the market because I had little response to this letter. One publisher was sympathetic because he was also waging a battle in court. Special mention and thanks go to **Maurice Horn** and to **Art Spiegelman** and **Francoise Mouly** of Raw Books — their response and **Ms. Mouly**'s and **Mr. Horn**'s testimony at the trial was a result of my friendship with them. Also, **Denis Kitchen** was kind enough to make a nice contribution as well.

I did receive congratulations from some publishers after the victory, but I now think that in this business, as in all others, competition does not permit solidarity. I realize now that the feeling of "family" and of "solidarity" came not from other publishers in the first place, but from distributors, retailers and fans — and they understood what was going on and were supportive. Except for one distributor who cancelled an order, others increased theirs and did not complain of the price increase. The "value" of the book was increased by a special sticker certifying that the copy was from the seized shipment.

BRUCE: *Has there been any recurrence of this "attention"?*

BERND: Just this week another of my books, VIDEO CLIPS by **Liberatore**, was stopped by an inspector at Iberia Airlines...in fact he had stopped and examined several shipments that day and had caused a huge delay at the cargo building. His decision to stop the book was overruled by the same official who had upheld the decision to stop SQUEAK two months earlier!! So, you see, some progress has been made. VIDEO CLIPS had *nothing* explicit in it for sure, so it further supports my view that it is the opinion of the Customs inspector involved in all these items com-

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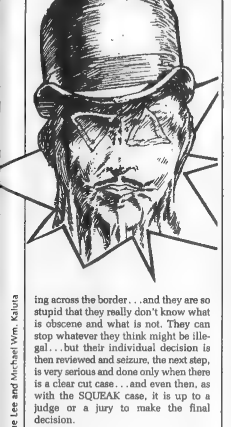


ing across the border . . . and they are so stupid that they really don't know what is obscene and what is not. They can stop whatever they think might be illegal . . . but their individual decision is then reviewed and seizure, the next step, is very serious and done only when there is a clear cut case . . . and even then, as with the SQUEAK case, it is up to a judge or a jury to make the final decision.

BRUCE: *How has all this affected the business?*

BERND: Orders have increased since the victory though one distributor cancelled, claiming that they couldn't wait and didn't want to pay the higher price. Each copy has a special sticker in it now, making it a little bit of history.

The seizure and trial *did* get plenty of exposure, I think, considering that the COMICS BUYER'S GUIDE published first page articles of everything that I sent them and COMICS JOURNAL also published the same press releases and had an extensive coverage of the victory. I also got interviewed and an article published in PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, which is the major industry publication, and for me that was a high point. The N.Y. DAILY NEWS even ran two articles with illustrations . . . so I can't complain.

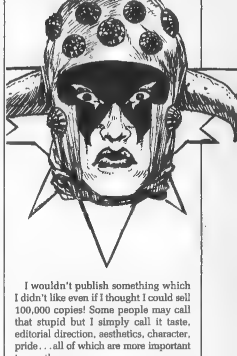
BRUCE: *Knowing how rocky a road it would turn out to be, would you do it all again?*

BERND: Yes, I would. I was lucky to have so few rocks on that road, as I said earlier, because at another time and/or with another title that I have published, the road would have been a lot rockier.

BRUCE: *What's up ahead for Catalan Communications?*

BERND: Catalan will be publishing more of the same, as well as new artists in the years ahead. I plan to continue works by the artists who we have established already, as well as ones who have never been published in the U.S. before. Like **Martí**'s "Cabbie" in July 1986 and **Giandino**'s "Hungarian Rhapsody" in November. There's plenty of material in Europe that I would like to see in English. I'd also like to publish more Americans like **Will Eisner**, **Craig Russell**, **Jeff Jones**, **Kaluta**, or **Williamson**. I'd love to have them submit book packages for possible publications. I want to publish the best European and American artists — unfortunately, I find most of the best in Europe and not here in the U.S. What most encourages me about continuing and increasing Catalan's publications is that I am (a) convinced that the works which we have and will publish are the most intelligent and beautiful art in the general comics genre and that (b) the market for this kind of material is increasing every day and that it's only a matter of time until there is enough market to support more titles and larger print runs. Its a matter of education and building the market — our books do not appeal to the masses here because of the low level of sophistication and education of the masses. It's like a good art film, or classical music — there's not a big fortune in art.

Art from STARSTRUCK: THE SPACE OPERA, directed by Elaine Lee, music by Dwight Dixon, and designed by Mike Kaluta — one of the few American artists Bernd would like to publish.



I wouldn't publish something which I didn't like even if I thought I could sell 100,000 copies! Some people may call that stupid but I simply call it taste, editorial direction, aesthetics, character, pride . . . all of which are more important to me than money.

I think that there are enough people in this country who are starving for comic art that will eventually find their way to us and support us . . . I see it every day . . . but we didn't start here with the history (I should say that we have forgotten our comic art history) of appreciation that we find in Europe, where each of my books sell 1000% more copies! It's the exact opposite in Europe, where Marvel comics sell about as well as my books do here . . . its a different sensibility. I don't know how else to explain it.

copyright © 1985 Elaine Lee and Michael Wm. Kaluta

"We have 3500 subscribers with another

Since the introduction of direct-sales comic books a lot of new businesses have popped up across the nation. Comic-book shops are one of these new ventures. Another new business that arose is that of a subscription service. This type of subscription service is different from those that are sold through the comic-book companies themselves. Independent subscription services not only sell you comics and comic-related material, but they do it at a discount, plus they send your books to you in better shape than the newsstand.

One of the first subscription services to pop up was Westfield Comics out of Madison, WI, which is run and owned by Sherill Ayres. Sherill, along with her husband Bruce, has made Westfield Comics tops in the field of subscription services.

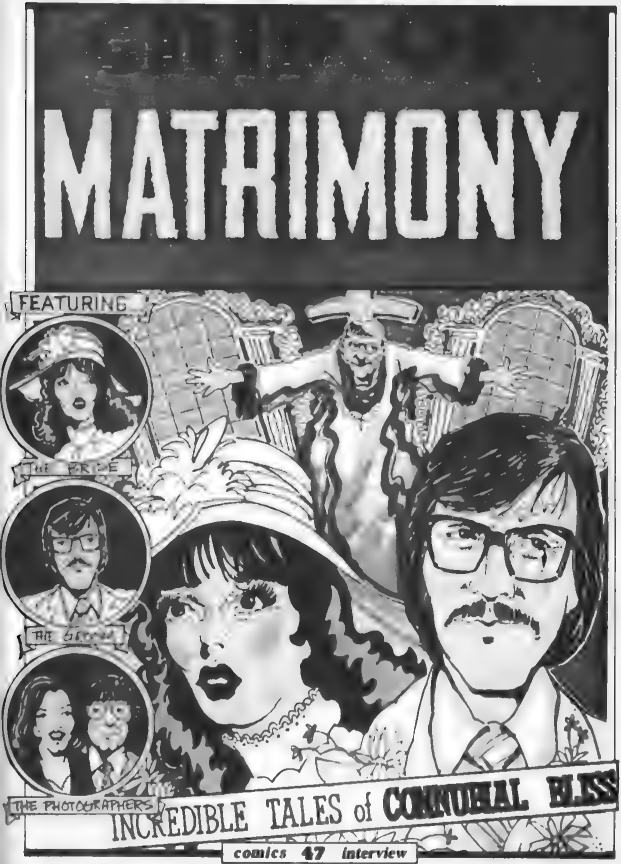
While in Chicago attending the ChicagoCon, I got a chance to sit and talk to Sherill and Bruce about Westfield Comics and some other interesting topics. This interview was held at the Ramada-O'Hare Hotel in the Hotel Ballroom/Convention Room. It was about 1:00 in the morning as the band from the

SHERILL AND BRUCE AYRES

VITAL STATISTICS

Names: Sherill and Bruce Ayres
Born: (Sherill) 25 September 1944 — Richland Center, WI. (Bruce) 25 August 1947 — Madison, WI.
Current Residence: Madison, WI
Occupations: (Sherill) Owner of Westfield Comics — 6 years. (Bruce) Owner of Capital City Comics — 15 years
Aspirations: (Sherill) To spend six months out of every year traveling. (Bruce) to live part of the year in California and Scotland
Favorite Movie Double Bill: (Sherill) The Russian version of WAR AND PEACE and CLOCKWORK ORANGE (Bruce) BARRY LYNDON and THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALANCE
Pet Peeves: (Sherill) Disorganization and untidiness. (Bruce) TV networks refusal to telecast most championship boxing matches in lighter weight division
Favorite Non-Comic Pastimes: (Sherill) Rereading my favorite books and playing the piano. (Bruce) Playing drums or watching boxing matches

700 to 800 that float in and out."



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"DNAGENTS is not any better than X-MEN."

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nearby Hotel barroom blasted out with a rock-and-roll soundtrack. . .

STEPHEN SCOTT BEAU SMITH: *Basically, how did you-all get into the comic-book subscription service?*

BRUCE AYRES: Well, initially we decided that there was probably some kind of room for a national subscription service for collectors who didn't have an opportunity to get into comic-book shops on a regular basis, who were probably going to be finding themselves short in their collections. Where are they gonna go? They gotta go national. That was it.

BEAU: *Well, basically, how do people get ahold of you? How do they find out about you? Is it word of mouth? Did you put out advertising?*

BRUCE: Advertising #1, and word of mouth #2.

BEAU: *As far as a subscription service, what do you advertise to get a person to subscribe with you — other than they can't get it in their area?*

SHERILL AYRES: Discounts.

BRUCE: I'd say price is a factor.

SHERILL: Yeah. Discounts is a major factor.

BRUCE: We give 'em a break as far as cover price. They're not expected to pay cover price on anything, and that helps alleviate the bite, so to speak, of paying a little bit in advance and paying the postage and all that sort of stuff. If you're not paying cover prices it doesn't hurt so much having to do that kind of stuff.

BEAU: *Is discount one of the main reasons people subscribe, or is it lack of a comic shop?*

BRUCE: Initially we thought supply.

SHERILL: But discount was the major reason — the type of service and the discount. Those were the two major reasons why people were buying from us. Access to a comic shop was not as important.

BEAU: *About how many subscribers do you go out to?*

SHERILL: We have about 3500 of what we call current subscribers, with another 700 to 800 that float in and out on an irregular basis.

BEAU: *Are most of these people located, say, in the same territory, or is it spread out pretty far?*

SHERILL: We have subscribers in every state, and a lot of them are concentrated on the East and West coasts.

BEAU: *Well, Bruce, we know you've got a comics shop called Capital City Comics, right?*

BRUCE: Right.

BEAU: *Is there any connection as far as business between Westfield and your comics shop and Capital City Distribution?*

The cover of Sherril and Bruce's wild and woolly monthly newsletter, by Dave (ROCKETEER) Stevens.

SHERILL: Westfield Comics and Capital City Comics are two totally separate businesses.

BRUCE: Sherill and I helped finance Capital City Distribution. We needed a good distributor initially, both for our mail-order and for my comic-book shop, and we simply loaned them the initial finances to get into business. In return for that they treat us in a friendly fashion. We don't get any real big breaks like a discount or a service that no one else gets or anything like that.

BEAU: *That must work out to your advantage, having your distributor in the same town.*

BRUCE: Well, just being next door, so to speak, helps.

SHERILL: Our warehouse is two blocks away from our distributor, so whenever anything comes in we go over there and we've got it, within a few minutes of when it's distributed.

BEAU: *You carry comics. Any other comic-related material that Westfield Subscription Service supplies to the readers, to the fans?*

BRUCE: Not too much. We've always made an effort to supply stuff that's comic related — and we'll also carry products from Marvel U.K. like STARBURST. But we found out that our subscribers are interested in the comics medium, and if it's not a graphic story format of some kinds they're not interested. Movies, popular culture, that type stuff — they're not too interested.

BEAU: *So you don't get a lot of calls, say, for magazine stuff, like NATIONAL LAMPOON or PLAYBOY or TV GUIDE?*

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"SWAMP THING is as good as mainstream gets."

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SHERILL: Virtually none.

BEAU: *Is there a secret formula, a reason why you think Westfield has become so successful among the other comics subscription services? Basically, I guess, you all have the samestuff to offer, but you seem to be coming out ahead of any of the others.*

BRUCE: Well, I think it's nice of you to say that on the one hand, but I think if there's a key to success in any field, it's your enthusiasm for what you're doing. We really like comics. We really are serious about the comic-collecting business. We all collect. All of the people on our staff are comics enthusiasts. Sherill . . .

SHERILL: . . . excluded. *(Laughter).*

BRUCE: Sherrill likes to make fun of the fact she's not a big comics collector but she is a big comics fan. They just don't do the kind of comics she likes anymore. She likes Fifties-style comics and — now it's all superheroics. But I think that everybody really enjoys comics collecting, and our service is designed to fulfill the needs of a comics collector — in terms of what they would want. We always envisioned it in terms of, "If I was a comics collector and I want to do business through the mail what would I want?"

SHERILL: We try to look at it from a collector's point of view.

BRUCE: Yeah. We never looked at it from the standpoint of, "I'm a distributor — I'm a dealer. This is what they gotta do for me before I do this for them." Our attitude was, is this what a collector wants and where does it start — 'cause we're collectors ourselves and we looked at it that way. We still do. Always will, I'm sure.

BEAU: *Well, Sherill, since you've gotten into it have you found any comics now that you do try to read?*

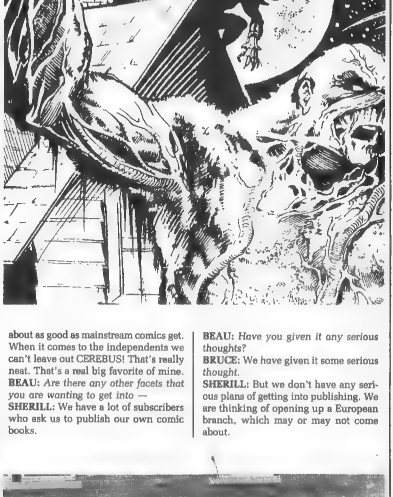
SHERILL: I try to read JONAH HEX. I love JONAH HEX.

BRUCE: That's cancelled now, dear.

SHERILL: Now I'm without a title again. *(Laughter.)* But I also enjoy the EC Libraries.

BEAU: *How about you, Bruce — as far as what goes on now, what comics do you look forward to reading?*

BRUCE: Well, I've never read a bad issue of CONAN. I'm one of those folks — I know it's on the downslide and there isn't collector approval — but I really like the genre. I enjoyed **Howie Chaykin's** AMERICAN FLAGG, **Grell's** SABLE. I think the First people are really doing a fine job. I'm extremely partial to local guys; **Mike Baron** and **Steve Rude** —their NEXUS is definitely one of the best comics out. And DC'S SWAMP THING. I love the horror genre. I like to be scared, and they're doing a fine job. SWAMP THING is probably about as good as mainstream comics get. When it comes to the independents we can't leave out CEREBUS! That's really neat. That's a real big favorite of mine.



BEAU: *Are there any other facets that you are wanting to get into —*

SHERILL: We have a lot of subscribers who ask us to publish our own comic books.

BEAU: *Have you given it any serious thoughts?*

BRUCE: We *have* given it some serious *thought.*

SHERILL: But we don't have any serious plans of getting into publishing. We are thinking of opening up a European branch, which may or may not come about.

"Contemporary comic shops are junk shops."

FOR A COUPLE OF YEARS I HAD BEEN THINKING I COULD WRITE COMIC BOOK STORIES THAT WERE DIFFERENT FROM ANYTHING BEING DONE BY BOTH STRAIGHT CARTOONISTS AND UNDERGROUND CARTOONISTS LIKE CRUMB. NOW, WITH CRUMB AND ARMSTRONG THERE, I STARTED THINKING ABOUT IT AGAIN—IN MORE DETAIL THAN EVER.
THE GUYS WHO DO THAT ANIMAL COMIC AN' SUPER-HERO STUFF FOR STRAIGHT COMICS ARE REALLY LIMITED BECAUSE THEY GOTTA TRY T' APPEAL TO KIDS. TH' GUYS WHO DO UNDERGROUND COMICS HAVE REALLY OPENED THINGS UP, BUT THERE ARE STILL PLENTY MORE THINGS THAT CAN BE DONE WITH 'EM. THEY GOT GREAT POTENTIAL. YOU C'N DO AS MUCH WITH COMICS AS THE NOVEL OR MOVIES OR PLAYS OR ANYTHING. COMICS ARE WORDS AN' PICTURES; YOU C'N DO ANYTHING WITH WORDS AN' PICTURES!

A brand of graphic storytelling usually found in comics shops but not department stores, says Bruce. Robert Crumb's rendition of Harvey Pekar's unique AMERICAN SPLENDOR, repackaged by Doubleday/Dolphin.

BEAU: *Can you . . . I'll tell you what — I'll start with you, Sherill. Can you give us just a little individual background? Was it a log cabin and you read by firelight? How did it start for Sherill?*

SHERILL: My background really is in academics. I was working on my dissertation in psychology when I got into the comic-book business. I was just taking a leave of absence for a year when we started Westfield, and there was just no turning back. And I worked for years in my family's business, so I was familiar with business practices — taxes, personnel, accounting, etc!

BEAU: *How ab..ut you, Bruce? Did you read comics as a kid?*

BRUCE: I read 'em from the time I was a kid to now. It's been sort of a steady thing.

BEAU: *Bruce, what kind of future do you see for comic-book retailers? What do you see, say, five years down the road?*

BRUCE: Well, I think that comic-book reading has been moving from what you call the genetics or everyday comic-book reader to the specialty level. Comic books in their heyday, at their peak in terms of sales, meant everything to every man, so to speak — during the Forties and the mid-Fifties. But nowadays it's a highly specialized, highly developed sort of artform. The comic-book shop is going to have to address more specifically the comic-book collector, the enthusiast, rather than just a sort of generic or general 13-year-old market. On the one hand you can't ignore kids, but the market is going to be people who are really serious enthusiasts of the artform.

BEAU: *How do you think the comic-book companies themselves should cultivate young readers to get them to this? You can't have old readers unless you have young readers.*

BRUCE: I don't know. Both Marvel and DC are addressing that quite seriously now. They're worried about maintaining their market share and their ability to merchandise and license their products. I understand that. But I think the comic-book shop fulfills a different function that's not primarily related to merchandising Spider-Man t-shirts or Superman pillow cases. That's something the department stores do just fine. The comic-book shop is gonna address people who are a little more interested in graphics and specifically graphic storytelling techniques. Guys like **Howard Chaykin** or **Steve Rude** or **Mike Baron** or **Steve Englehart** who are serious storytellers are gonna be treated the same way that a **Robert Crumb**, or a **Milton Caniff** is treated in Europe. That would seem to me to be the function of a comic-book shop. But I might be wrong. I don't know.

BEAU: *As far as retailing goes what do you think the hardest part of being a comic-book retailer is?*

BRUCE: I don't think there is a hard part to it. I think any time you're in retail there's just a certain amount of difficulty involved in being organized, in advertising, displaying things effectively, and having enough room. Any person that's involved in specialized retailing always worries about advertising the particular product and how you're gonna display it. I think the worst thing about contemporary comic-book shops is they're mostly junk shops . . a flea market type situation. And what you really want to do is have a situation where everything is highly organized and sort of articulate to a certain extent. The more that comic-book shops move towards more of a structured environment I think the more successful they'll be. It's as simple as that. And everybody's gonna have a little different market, and some markets are gonna be big on DC as opposed to Marvel, and vice versa, and some markets'll be a little more aggressive in terms of avant-garde, black-and-whites or something like that — and they'll have a little different style and a little different feel. But I think we're talking about *specialty* shops, period. We're not talking about shops that are trying to reach a large cross-section of the American public.

BEAU: *Sherill, as far as the subscription service part goes, what's the hardest part of your job?*

SHERILL: I think the organizational aspect. There's just so much paperwork with that many orders coming in — and the time constraints. We oftentimes work a lot longer hours than we'd like to because of the deadlines but we have to get the orders out on time. Even the most rudimentary tasks like opening mail (the subscription orders) and doing the banking are very time-consuming jobs. And because we have only one week "lead time" between when the orders are due and when our shipping period begins, time is truly of the essence.

BEAU: *There never seems to be enough people to do it, or enough time to do it, at least as well as you'd like it?*

SHERILL: That's right, but we have a very good staff and they all contribute 110%.

BEAU: *This goes to both of you — from a subscription part and a retailing part, what changes in the comic-book industry itself would you like to see — that would make it easier?*

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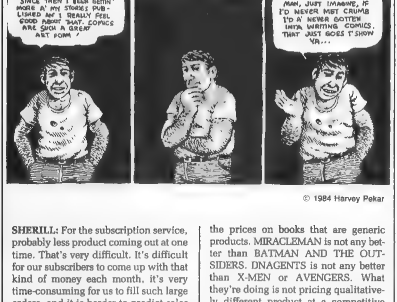
"They buy the Jim Shooter bill of goods."


SINCE THEN I BEGIN GETTIN' MORE A' MY STORIES PUB-LISHED AN I REALLY FEEL GOOD ABOUT THAT. COMICS ARE SUCH A GREAT ART FORM.
MAN, JUST IMAGINE, IF I'D NEVER MET CRUMB AN' GOTTEN INTA WRITING COMICS, THAT JUST GOES T'SHOW YA...

© 1984 Harvey Pekar

SHERILL: For the subscription service, probably less product coming out at one time. That's very difficult. It's difficult for our subscribers to come up with that kind of money each month, it's very time-consuming for us to fill such large orders, and it is harder to predict sales accurately when there is so much product coming out in a single month.

BRUCE: Any time that you have a lot of product it's more difficult for people to make choices. And it's more difficult for you to recommend some of the usually higher-priced independent comics. It helps if it's a slightly more compact market, as far as the product is concerned. But I think the most difficult thing right now is to get people to part with $2.00 for an independent comic book when you can buy an AVENGERS or a BATMAN for 75¢ — a known quantity that is going to deliver a certain amount of satisfaction. It's getting harder to say to a person, "Well, lookit, you can spend an extra buck and buy a NEXUS or a MR. X. Here, buy this black-and-white comic book by **Dave Sim** — CEREBUS. Buy a LOVE AND ROCKETS." I think that's the most difficult part of retailing, trying to get people to cross over from mainstream comic collecting to trying something else that is not necessarily better but a little different — expand their horizons.

BEAU: *What do you think the comic books, especially the independents who are asking you to pay, say, $1.00 more for their black-and-whites, do you think they're promoting those books in the right way to get the readers to try?*

BRUCE: Yeah. Yeah. I think they are. I really think they are. I don't think there's anything they can do about it. Eclipse is trying to . . . Eclipse is making a point of lowering their prices, and they feel that's a very important factor — but what they're doing is they're lowering the prices on books that are generic products. MIRACLEMAN is not any better than BATMAN AND THE OUTSIDERS. DNAGENTS is not any better than X-MEN or AVENGERS. What they're doing is not pricing qualitatively different product at a competitive price. They're taking the better stuff and pricing it high. If they'd take an AMERICAN FLAGG, if they'd take a LOVE AND ROCKETS, if they'd take a CEREBUS, and put it at 75¢ and see what happens — maybe nothing would happen. You have to price stuff that appeals to a 13-year-old at a 13-year-old price level. LOVE AND ROCKETS is oriented to a slightly older audience, a slightly more sophisticated audience, and therefore an audience that has the financial wherewithal to spend the extra buck or two — but it's still a difficult question. I deal with a lot of collectors day to day who are 25, 35, that just buy Marvel, or just buy DC, or just buy both, and would never think to buy a black-and-white product or to buy something that is not from one of the two majors, 'cause that's what they know. That's what they grew up with. That's what they understand. And they'll buy **Jim Shooter** and the **Julie Schwartz** bill of goods, in terms of this is what's being promoted. This is what they enjoy, and there's nothing wrong with it on the one hand, but there is other good stuff out there.

BEAU: *On the personal side, from what you've told us and stuff, how do you two find time to actually have a home life between these two businesses.?*

BRUCE: Geez, I don't know. We do.

SHERILL: Yeah.

BEAU: *Do you have to set time apart and make a special ...*

SHERILL: Yes.

BEAU: *. . . effort towards it?*

BRUCE: Sure.

SHERILL: I made a resolution at the first of the year that I was not going to bring

ON THE OTHER HAND, THINK A' ALL TH' PEOPLE I DON'T MEET WHO COULDA GOTTEN ME INTO STUFF IN NOT EVEN THINKIN' ABOUT NOW...
UH
MAN, THIS IS WEIRD... I STARTED T'TELL YA ABOUT WHAT CRUMB WAS LIKE B'FORE HE GOT FAMOUS. THEN I STARTED TELLIN' YA ABOUT ME.. THEN I STARTED THINKIN' ABOUT FATE...
WELL, Y' KNOW, NOW IT IS ! Y' KNOW
WHY, TAKE IT EASY.
WHEW!
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"CEREBUS is a big favorite of mine."

Everyone's favorite aardvark pulls a Pinocchio, from CEREBUS #82, by Dave Sim.

so much work home in the evenings. I was finding myself working 14, 16-hour days, day after day after day. So, I'm making a conscious effort to leave the office behind when I go home. I think Bruce does, too.

BRUCE: Sure. That's difficult.

SHERILL: We love to go to movies. We like to go out to eat. We do find time.

BEAU: *Well, I tell you, this is also directed toward you, and we were talking about this before, how does it feel for a woman in a business that is really male dominated as far as not just running it but . . .*

BRUCE: . . . images and other things?

SHERILL: I think it's been an asset.

BEAU: *How?*

SHERILL: I think one of the reasons why Westfield may have become so successful is because the people who have the most direct contact with the subscribers are all women. I think that has helped. I'm not sure quite why. *(Laughter.)* We mother them a little, nurture them a bit, maybe.

BRUCE: She has more patience, a more tolerant attitude, as a result of being a mother and a woman, and I think there's some certain truth in that. I know that both myself and **Greg Schaben**, our warehouse manager, you know, we get a little . . .

SHERILL: Testy. *(Laughter.)* Best double *entendre* I've heard in a long time.

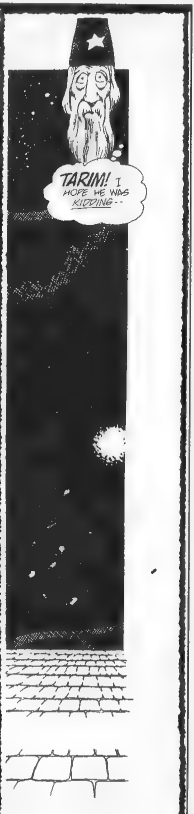
BRUCE: Testy. I would say testy. But people sometimes make just impossible demands . . . just totally out-of-sorts suggestions.

SHERILL: The personalized service is really important, though, and I think maybe a little easier for women to give, to meet the kinds of demands that a lot of these subscribers make on us.

BRUCE: Sure. Well, it depends on what it is. Because, in my business I'm a retailer on a day-to-day level and it's a highly-personalized service. I know almost all of the collectors by name and I see 'em on up days and down days. Any time you're retailing you're in that kind of situation.

BEAU: *As far as retail sales, like most retail sales jobs, do you feel sometimes that you have to promote? Say if you've got a customer who just, you know, just buys Marvel or just buys DC, do you try to promote or get him to try other things? Not necessarily to push him into something like a more expensive book, just . . .*

BRUCE: Sometimes yes and sometimes no. I think it depends on how you're reading the individual. I think sometimes if I push a guy he'll feel uncomfortable, like I'm nagging him. Sometimes a person welcomes it. It all de-



© 1985 Dave Sim

It's Time

by Jan Strnad

Yep, you've dallied long enough. It's time for *you* to start picking up "one of the best titles around" (according to Martin Crookall of *Fantasy Advertiser*).

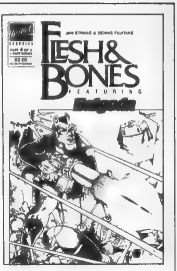
Dal's back in his own mini-series in the first offering from the new *Upshot Graphics* division of *Fantagraphics Books!* Here's what's in store for Dal fans, old and new, in the four-part series *Flesh & Bones*:

Book One: The humans under Dal's command are revolting, and none of them is more revolting than *Colonel Kenneth Moxley*, leading the people in mutiny! Has Dal cracked under the strain?

Book Two: Is it just sub-space psychosis, or is Navigator Stark really seeing angels? Dal's not waiting to find out—he's out to kick tail on the planet of the bubble-people. Gunner's new sub-space torpedos are put to the test!

Book Three: Dal's on the trail of his lost people and Stark's under the sway of her "angel"—or is it something more sinister? Meanwhile the Nimp are closing in and the fur is about to fly!

Book Four: Dal descends into the Demmeon Pit, the Nimp attack in force, the Canidans are caught in the thick of it, and now the whole planet's tearing itself apart! A grand finale to the Saga of Dal!



And as if that weren't enough, every issue of *Flesh & Bones* sports a complete chapter of the indelible *BoJeffries Saga* by those two crazy Brits **Alan Moore** and **Steve Parkhouse.** Is a humble rent collector any match for a girl who can "turn a cream egg into a diamond and then eat it anyway?" And doesn't the family werewolf violate the rule against keeping pets?

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"Both Marvel and DC are worried..."

A tender if top-heavy scene from LOVE AND ROCKETS #15 by Los Bros. Hernandez, published by and available from Fantagraphics Books.

pends on the individual person that I'm talking to and how they feel and how they were brought up and stuff like that. So, you've gotta call it on every individual situation...

BEAU: *Like an umpire, as you see 'em?*

BRUCE: Yeah. It really is different every time.

BEAU: *I've got a kind of a fun question I'll address to both of you. If you were on a desert island and could have a complete run of any comic book ever made — what would it be?*

SHERILL: Well, I would take JONAH HEX.

BEAU: *How about you, Bruce?*

BRUCE: Golly, I never thought about that. I'd probably take THE BRAVE AND THE BOLD for the variety.

BEAU: *Where do you see Westfield, say, five years from now? What do you see Westfield doing?*

SHERILL: I think we'll still be basically the same, only bigger. Maybe more branches.

BEAU: *Other cities?*

SHERILL: And maybe other countries.

BRUCE: I'd definitely say the same.

BEAU: *Sherrill, since you haven't been as much involved with comics do you think that's helped you as far as the business goes, the subscription service?*

SHERILL: I think if I hadn't had Bruce it would have been impossible — but since I had people around me who did have the expertise in that area...it wasn't really necessary. I have expertise in the business area, and that's basically what I do, and I have other people who have expertise in the content area and are very interested in comic books. I don't really think it's made that much difference.

BRUCE: Actually, what it's made her do is wish she could read more comics. 'Cause all the time she's hearing stuff from the warehouse and the office about what a wonderful comic this is and what a great storyteller this guy is. I've had Sherill tell me many times, "Boy, I wish I had the time to read this."

SHERILL: Yes. That's true. I think I am intrinsically more interested in the comic-book format, but now I'm in that situation where I have so little free time, but I'm hoping to read more comics as time goes by.

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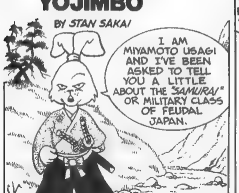
USAGI YOJIMBO™

BY STAN SAKAI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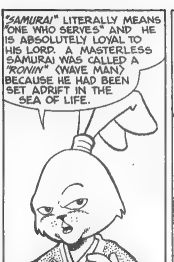
"SAMURAI" LITERALLY MEANS "ONE WHO SERVES." AND HE IS ABSOLUTELY LOYAL TO HIS LORD. A MASTERLESS SAMURAI WAS CALLED A "RONIN" (WAVE MAN) BECAUSE HE HAD BEEN SET ADRIFT IN THE SEA OF LIFE.

THE SWORD WAS THE SOUL OF THE SAMURAI AND HIS MOST PRIZED POSSESSION. EVEN IN TIMES OF PEACE, HE NEVER APPEARED IN PUBLIC WITHOUT THEM. THE STANDARD FIGHTING SWORD IS CALLED THE "KATANA" AND THE SHORTER SWORD IS A "WAKIZASHI".

THE SAMURAI FOLLOWS "BUSHIDO" (THE WAY OF THE WARRIOR), A CODE OF CONDUCT MUCH LIKE THE CODE OF CHIVALRY OF EUROPE'S MIDDLE AGES.
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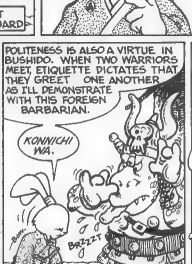
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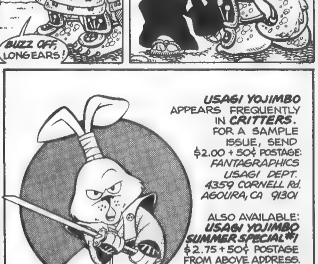

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"We're in 22 cities up and down the east coast...more good conventions than bad."

GAYLE HUEY

During one of my phone conversations with Sal Buscema regarding my handling the sale of his original art (pages still available — be the first on your block! See COMICS INTERVIEW #25 for the ad), he mentioned that he would be in Richmond, Virginia, attending a convention and doing FREE sketches for fans later that month.

Remembering a promise that I made to DAK several months ago that I would get him an interview with a convention organizer, I thought I would kill two birds with one stone and talk to Sal face to face, and get the interview.

Following a ridiculously expensive breakfast at the Holiday Inn restaurant (pancakes, hash browns, and milk — $7.85), I went back to the convention hall to have a chat with Gayle Huey, President of Jubilee Enterprises. And through cries of "Gayle, where is my table?" and "What time is Sal getting here, Gayle?" we were able to complete the discussion that follows...

BRIAN TALLEY: *What prompted you to go into the convention business?*
GAYLE HUEY: I was in computer work for about twelve years, and I got out of it — I had been dealing on the side on weekends and making some extra money, and I thought, "This is a good way of making money." Plus, I'm a golfer — I play a lot of golf — so I wanted something where I could be my own boss.
BRIAN: *How long have you been at it?*
GAYLE: About four years now.
BRIAN: *Would you say it is a successful business?*
GAYLE: I think it is. We're in twenty-two cities up and down the east coast. We have a lot more good conventions than we do bad ones.
BRIAN: *What did you do to get started? Did you buy this person out?*
GAYLE: It's not a question of that, I just picked up — well, I didn't actually pick up where he left off, either, because I was doing shows in the Washington area — started out in two places in the area, and the location where he was — I just took that over. It's just a matter of going out and getting the hotels, finding the dealers, advertising, etcetera, etcetera. More or less sponsoring the shows.
BRIAN: *With the public image of comics and the people who read them being what it is, what is the reaction you get when you tell people you're organizing a comic-book show?*
GAYLE: I don't find it that bad anymore — used to be it was frowned on, to say the least. Now it's not, because of the fact that everybody is in it for the money and security purposes. In most of the hotels in the cities that we are in — when we call on them, they say, "Hey, this is great! You won't have any trouble getting media coverage." And this is something else that we have found — the media coverage is phenomenal.
BRIAN: *So many of the stories, especially for TV, are played for laughs, or "silled up" — I had it happen to me. Do you get good treatment?*
GAYLE: Well, what I generally go in with is, "Hey, we've got books into the thousands of dollars down to fifty cents at our shows." And of course when they hear, "thousands of dollars," right away they are interested.
BRIAN: *When the media comes in, do they pay much attention to the fans?*
GAYLE: I don't think so. I don't think the media really looks at the fans. Occasionally they will interview one, but they are really more interested in the

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Gayle Huey
Occupation: Convention Consultant
Birth: February 9, DuBois, Pennsylvania
Residence: Washington, D.C.
Favorite TV Show: DYNASTY
Least Favorite Movie: RAMBO

"Now I've got doctors and lawyers and

This page and next: X-MEN and ROBOTECH, two of Gayle's interests.

dealers and the prices of the books, who is sponsoring the show, or the artist.

BRIAN: *Do you have media coming in today?*

GAYLE: I probably do. I might have some radio stations coming in. It seems like everytime we come here, we get some media in.

BRIAN: *How do you select an area to have a show in? Do you have specific things that you are looking for in an area to hold a show?*

GAYLE: I don't know. It's funny, I've had a pretty good feel for the areas. I don't go into the larger cities, *per se* — I am into some large cities, but I stay basically in cities like Richmond and some of the ones that are not as big. I'm going to be in Sharon, Pennsylvania, and if you know the size of Sharon, you know it's not a huge place at all. Sometime you go by the number of comics shops in the area. If people come in and put up three or four shops, then you know it has to be a good area.

BRIAN: *Are some cities better draws than others? Some that you have more success in?*

GAYLE: Yes, definitely. Washington, D.C. is very successful for us, because we've been there so long — that was one of our first cities. You do have areas that are better than others, and there are some that I wouldn't go back to. You just kind of try it and see what's going to happen.

BRIAN: *What about college towns? I know you've done Williamsburg (College of William and Mary) a couple of times, are college towns good draws?*

GAYLE: Some are good, some aren't. I'm going to be in Philadelphia next weekend. Adventures of Ambler, which is a comics-associated group that is in the college itself, are going to be doing the show with us. I have done a college in Pittsburgh near the University of Pittsburgh, and it was very successful.

BRIAN: *You do primarily one day shows...*

GAYLE: Yes, we do only one day shows

BRIAN: *Is that better for the fans than a three-day spread?*

GAYLE: I think it is. I've never really believed in two-day shows, because I think you lose your crowd the second day around. It's the first day that you really pull in your crowd — you might have two hundred the first day and maybe fifty the second day.

BRIAN: *You also have to figure that you have people who are going to spend more money because they aren't paying for a hotel room.*

GAYLE: Yes, definitely.

BRIAN: *What steps do you take to be sure that you are going to have a good turnout?*

GAYLE: I advertise in the COMICS BUYER'S GUIDE, and in places that are into the comic-book scene. I do radio and TV ads — mainly radio and newspapers. TV we don't find to be too successful, because it's flashed on, and that's it.

BRIAN: *How do you decide who you are going to have appear at a show?*

GAYLE: I go by the public — who they want to see. You can tell. I've been doing this for four years, and I've developed a feel for the artists that are good. Right now, the ROBOTECH people are a big thing — fans want to see them. So you sort of get a feel for it — what book is selling, so that's the artist you get to come in.

BRIAN: *Do you have any favorites — artists who are easy to deal with?*

GAYLE: Yes, I have my favorites — I would rather not give a list. Sal is one of them... not because he is coming today, but because...

BRIAN: *Sal is a super guy.*

GAYLE: That's my opinion, too. I am particularly good friends with **John Romita, Jr.** — he's been a very good friend. I also like **Mike Hernandez.** He hasn't become well known yet, but he's done a good book, INFINITY, and he has a very good personality with the public. I like these artists — they are easy to work with — like the people from ROBOTECH last week were very good.

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ditch diggers coming to the shows!!"

BRIAN: *Do you get much of the prima donna act?*

GAYLE: Somewhat. I had one yesterday.

BRIAN: *Are they very demanding or just uncooperative?*

GAYLE: You have some who will get big, be in the limelight, and they think that they are top banana, and they will put a fee on themselves, and they will price themselves completely out of the business — so that you can't afford to get them, or they are such a high price that you don't think that it's going to be worth your while to get them. If you can bring someone in and pay them five hundred dollars, and they pull a thousand people, then it's worthwhile.

BRIAN: *You've made your money back.*

GAYLE: That's correct. But yet, some are... like I said, I had one yesterday — I won't mention any names, but I can notice the change. I had him for the first time in a show in Washington, and I can notice the change in personality from then to when I had him to a show after he had become real popular — his swelled head...

BRIAN: *How long a period of time did this take?*

GAYLE: I would say a matter of two years. He got popular with three different books, and all of a sudden...

BRIAN: *What makes a good convention? And on the other foot, what makes a bad one?*

GAYLE: Well, you don't go up against a football game — that makes for a bad convention, as we found out yesterday in Columbia, South Carolina. What makes a good convention is good, cooperative dealers, a good artist, naturally a lot of people, and a lot of good solid activities — tasteful activities, not cheap...

BRIAN: *Tacky costume shows with near nude women.*

GAYLE: Right. Tasteful things.

BRIAN: *What do you do? I see a wheel of fortune.*

GAYLE: We show three full-length movies, which keeps the public interest up, we have a wheel of super-heroes, where they can win prizes, and we have drawings for door prizes throughout the day — every hour on the hour and, of course, the artist. That makes a good show, to have activities. I would never do a show without activities.

BRIAN: *What about a bad show? What contributes to that?*

GAYLE: Number one — not many people. A bad show can be made many different ways. A poor artist — to get a poor artist in. I've had those, too, where people paid to get in to see a particular artist, and he was very snobbish to them — would not do sketches or sign autographs.

BRIAN: *Which is why he is there in the first place.*

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"Comic companies are hurting themselves."

GAYLE: And we do have a few who will do that — charge for autographs — not mentioning any names.

BRIAN: *How many shows a year do you put on?*

GAYLE: I would say in the neighborhood of about forty-eight altogether.

BRIAN: *Do you spread them out, or is there a "season"?*

GAYLE: For a while, I was traveling every weekend — Saturdays and Sundays — but I'm stopping that, and will be doing just Saturdays now for a year.

BRIAN: *Regarding the people who attend the shows — what would you say their average age is?*

GAYLE: Anywhere from eight to seventy-five years old.

BRIAN: *Would you say that it is primarily a "middle age" crowd?*

GAYLE: Yes — younger to middle age crowd.

BRIAN: *Comics fans, for the most part, are perceived by the general public as people with less than average intelligence quotients. From what you've seen from the people who attend your shows, how would you describe the average comics fan?*

GAYLE: Well, you can't say that they are someone who can't read. A lot of times, they say, "Well, anybody that collects comic books is someone who looks at the pictures and can't read." This is when it was frowned on. Now I've got doctors and lawyers and ditch diggers — anything you can name — coming to the shows and collecting comic books. So you can't say that there is a particular group or category coming to the shows.

BRIAN: *Do you get primarily repeat business from dealers, or do you have new ones coming in all the time?*

GAYLE: I get pretty much repeat business, and we have a lot of new ones coming in. In fact, we have a waiting list for tables at our Washington shows.

BRIAN: *How strong is your interest in comics as a hobby?*

GAYLE: I have no interest in comics as a hobby. I have an interest in comics as giveaways — this is the only interest that I have. I do maybe find a particular kind, like X- MEN, which is the most popular going right now — I do grab hold of it when I can — collect it. I don't really have a collection — I used to have about 15,000.

BRIAN: *Do you think the companies are hurting themselves, with book prices continually going up?*

GAYLE: I think some companies are hurting themselves very much. I have found that out from some artists who don't want to work for a certain publishing company anymore — they are going to another company, and I think a lot of

companies are hurting themselves with their prices, and putting so much demand on prices with their books, that nobody wants to buy them, and that also hurts the artist when it happens. (INTERRUPTION CAUSED BY ILL MANNERED CHILDREN WHO WERE ATTENDING A FUNCTION IN A NEIGHBORING ROOM, NECESSITATING A CALL TO HOTEL SECURITY.)

BRIAN: *Do you get problems like that much — kids that want to just hang around and be a bother to that high of a degree?*

GAYLE: I don't. That's the first time that's ever happened. Normally, kids aren't that bad — they really aren't. Of course, you get a certain age group and look out! Anything can happen.

BRIAN: *Do you see the convention business growing?*

GAYLE: Oh, yes. There are more people getting into it.

BRIAN: *Do you think that in the near future there might be a glut of conventions?*

GAYLE: It might be oversaturated, I would say.

BRIAN: *Would cooperation among organizers and dealers help to prevent stepping on each other's toes?*

GAYLE: I think that the dealers will stick with whoever does the better shows — those that are used to my shows being good, I imagine they will stick with me, rather than go to somebody they don't know.

BRIAN: *Is interest in the hobby and in the field in general growing at a good rate?*

GAYLE: I think that it's a good rate, and I can see the difference in the last two years — going up instead of going down. In fact, I don't think it will ever go down, unless we go into a depression or something.

LAST WORD

Comics Interview 234 Fifth Ave. Suite 301 New York, NY 10001

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MILLER THRU THE MILL!

Dear DAK,

Is it over yet? I mean, has everyone now got the latest attack of **Frank Miller** Is God Disease out of their systems? I sincerely hope so, because observing it A) Bores my ass off, B) Irritates me no end and C) Makes me wonder why I'm sinking incredible amounts of my parents' money trying to learn the craft of drawing. I mean, if all I have to do is draw Superman with a malformed left arm and a head three sizes too small to earn thousands of bucks and get my picture in SPIN and ROLLING STONE, why am I bothering with art school, anyway?

Well, maybe all this is a bit harsh coming from me, since I will concede that Miller had a few valid points in his interview. (I liked his musings on the decline of "real romance/edventure/sex" in movies, for instance.) Most of what he said, however, just clarified why I've always been so lukewarm toward his work. Forgive me, **Mr. Miller**, but I for one don't think that playing up a character's more "mundane" qualities need automatically relegate him/her to the level of TV sitcom characterization. "God-like" heroes put me to sleep, as do epic battles against Darkseid or All the Organized Crime in the City, which is perhaps why I thought DAREDEVIL #192 was worth the entire "Elektra Saga" and the DARK KNIGHT series put together! (And as long as I'm shaking up a few minds, is there anyone else out there who thought that the **O'Neil/Janson** DAREDEVILs ran rings around most of their predecessors? Just curious.) Since you consider HILL ST. BLUES to be "lazy and slow," I'd love to know what you consider scintillating cops and robbers? THE EQUALIZER, perhaps?

You're doing a terrific job of playing both sides against the middle, **Mr. Miller**. Is Sheriff Chelo (or **Gilberto Hernandez's** "Heartbreak Soup"...you know, from that comic everyone who's anyone has to at least pretend they like) any less heroic than Batman or Dirty Harry just because we've yet to see a story where she blows out a perpetrator's brains? She keeps her more volatile townspeople from harming each other as best she can, and makes the kids go to school so "they won't end up dumb [illiterate] like her. (LOVE AND ROCKETS #12.) That's a hero to my eyes, not necessarily someone who's "above and beyond the rest of us." I mean, you or I couldn't really become Batman, or anyone like him, not without dying very young and/or being clapped in a loony bin, but we could be like Chelo, just by paying a little more attention to the problems around us. Does this make even the slightest bit of sense to anyone?

I sure hope so. Maybe the problem with comics is less that "superheroes are stupid and too numerous" and more the fact that **Miller** and the other Artists Making Comics Respectable Literature are so afraid of the stigma of writing/

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drawing another "Mutants Beat the Hell Out Of Each Other Saga" that they don't see they're attacking it from the wrong side. Maybe the real key to improving comics lies in simply broadening the definition of the hero, both superpowered (Zot, 'mazing man, and Miracleman are all superheroes, even if they weren't created in the image of **Stan Lee** and **Jack Kirby**) and others. Truthfully, I don't see **Miller** or his ilk doing anything along those lines. What I *do* see them doing is making comics a little more expensive and a lot more pretentious. We can all live without that.

Okay, I'll leave off playing amateur critic for now and request a few more interviews. How about **Joe Sinardi** (his MAXWELL MOUSE FOLLIES fills an ache I've had ever NEIL THE HORSE went under), **David Darrigo** (WORDSMITH'S scribe), **Karl Kessel**, **Larry Marder**, **Cindy Martin**, and a few more writers and artists from the Gold and Silver Age of comics, anyone you like. I've found them all rather interesting, especially **William Woolfolk**. I'd beware doing too many of these "focus on" issues like #31 though, DAK. I'm not a rabid Batman fan any more so than I am of giant Japanese robots, and so found all that stuff on the Caped Crusader a little hard to take; whereas, if you'd kept on a few of the "normal" subjects and saved about half of the Focus 'til next month, I might have enjoyed the whole shebang a lot more. That's just one opinion, of course; I'll be watching the letters' page carefully to see if anyone else feels the same.

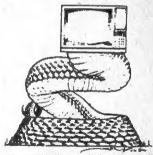
Oh yeah, PLEASE consider an interview with **Howard Cruse**. Now that Renegade is reprinting BAREFOOTZ, you'd have an ideal excuse. If the readers could survive porn star **Kelly Nichols** and the "existentialist and athiest" **Cat Yronwode**, I don't think that a few words from a GAY COMIX editor/contributor would cause the sky to fall in. Please think about it.

Amy Sacks
Still Jersey After All These Years

Several of the subjects you suggest are slated for interviews in the near future, Amy — the one you'll be seeing soonest is David Darrigo, interviewed by Paul Power. Keep those cards, letters, and contrarian opinions coming!

— DAK

SIMONSON & McGREGOR



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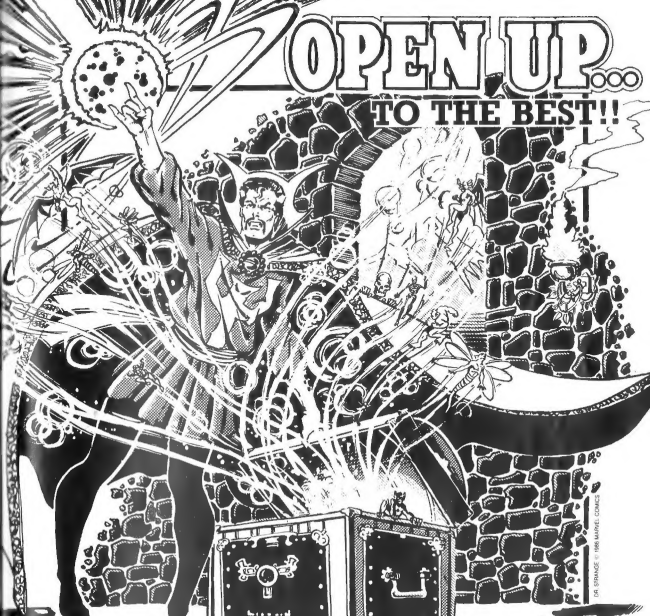

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